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By Faith Baldwin

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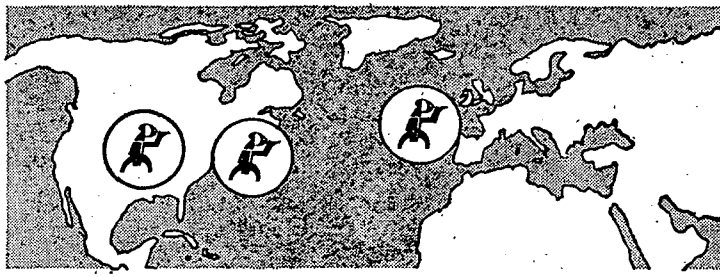
MURDER



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The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S
Mystery Magazine

FIRST PRIZE WINNER

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Winner of FIRST PRIZE *in the* CWA *contest*

P. D. JAMES

Here are the names of the winning authors and the titles of their prize-winning stories in the special Crime Writers Association contest sponsored by EQMM last year:

FIRST PRIZE

P. D. James's *Moment of Power*

SECOND PRIZES

Christianna Brand's *The Gemminy Crickets Case*
Gwendoline Butler's *The Sisterhood*

HONORABLE MENTION

Guy Cullingford's *Locals Should Know Best*
Rhona Petrie's *What We're All Hooked On*
John Burke's *Miss Mouse and Mrs. Mouse*

In this issue we bring you the First Prize Winner—P. D. James's *Moment of Power*—a distinguished and deeply moving story, told with great subtlety and compassion. This is the story of "a very commonplace murder," yet, on the other hand, a story of "secret pleasure" —altogether what Anthony Boucher has described, in referring to some of his favorite stories, as "a beautifully detailed and compelling study."

The author, P. D. James, was born in Oxford in 1920 and educated at Cambridge Girls' High School. Most of her childhood was spent in Cambridge, so she was lucky to be brought up in two of England's (and Europe's) loveliest cities. She married a doctor and has two daughters.

Her husband died in 1944 after a long illness. It was necessary for her to work and eventually she qualified in the field of hospital administration. She is now a Fellow of the Institute of Hospital Administrators, and at the time she won First Prize she was working for one of the Metropolitan Regional Hospital Boards which is responsible for hospital services extended to over four million people. Her

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chief hobby is writing, and with a full-time job and a family she has no time for other hobbies, except going, as often as possible, to the theater.

P. D. James has had three crime novels published—COVER HER FACE, A MIND TO MURDER, and UNNATURAL CAUSES. At present she is working on her fourth novel—but we hope that she will find time (somehow!) to write more short stories for EQMM . . .

MOMENT OF POWER

by P. D. JAMES

"WE CLOSE AT TWELVE ON SATURday," said the blonde in the Estate Office. "So if you keep the key after then, please drop it back through the letter box. It's the only key we have and there may be other people wanting to view on Monday. Sign here please, sir."

The "sir" was grudging, an afterthought. Her tone was reproving. She didn't really think he would buy the flat, this seedy old man with his air of spurious gentility, with his harsh voice. In her job you soon got a nose for the genuine inquirer. Ernest Gabriel. An odd name, half common, half fancy.

But he took the key politely enough and thanked her for her trouble. No trouble, she thought. God knew there were few enough people interested in that sordid little dump, not at the price they were asking. He could keep the key a week for all she cared.

She was right. Gabriel hadn't come to buy, only to view. It was the first time he had been back since it all happened sixteen years ago. He came neither as a pilgrim nor a penitent. He had returned under some compulsion which he hadn't even bothered to analyze. He had been on his way to visit his only living relative, an elderly aunt, who had recently been admitted to a geriatric ward. He hadn't even realized the bus would pass the flat.

But suddenly they were lurching through Camden Town and the road became familiar, like a photograph springing into focus; and with a *frisson* of surprise he recognized the double-fronted shop and the flat above. There was an Estate Agent's notice in the window. Almost without thinking, he had got off at the next stop, gone back to verify the name, and walked the half mile to the office. It had seemed as natural and inevitable as his daily bus journey to work.

Twenty minutes later he fitted the key into the lock of the front door and passed into the stuffy emptiness of the flat. The grimy walls still held the smell of cooking. There was a spatter of envelopes on

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the worn linoleum, dirtied and trampled by the feet of previous viewers. The light bulb swung naked in the hall and the door into the sitting room stood open. To his right was the staircase, to his left the kitchen.

Gabriel paused for a moment, then went into the kitchen. From the windows, half curtained with grubby gingham, he looked upward to the great black building at the rear of the flat, eyeless except for the one small square of window high on the fifth floor. It was from this window, sixteen years ago, that he had watched Denis Speller and Eileen Morrisey play out their commonplace little tragedy to its end.

He had no right to be watching them, no right to be in the building at all after six o'clock. That had been the nub of his awful dilemma. It had happened by chance. Mr. Maurice Bootman had instructed him, as the firm's filing clerk, to go through the papers in the late Mr. Bootman's upstairs den in case there were any which should be in the files. They weren't confidential or important papers—those had been dealt with by the family and the firm's solicitors months before. They were just a miscellaneous, yellowing collection of out-of-date memoranda, old accounts, receipts, and fading press clippings which had been bundled together into old Mr. Bootman's desk. He had been a great hoarder of trivia.

But at the back of the left-hand bottom drawer Gabriel had found a key. It was by chance that he tried it in the lock of the corner cupboard. It fitted. And in the cupboard Gabriel found the late Mr. Bootman's small but choice collection of pornography.

He knew that he had to read the books; not just to snatch surreptitious minutes with one ear listening for a footstep on the stairs or the whine of the approaching elevator and fearful always that his absence from his filing room would be noticed. No, he had to read them in privacy and in peace. So he devised his plan.

It wasn't difficult. As a trusted member of the staff he had one of the Yale keys to the side door at which goods were delivered. It was locked on the inside at night by the porter before he went off duty. It wasn't difficult for Gabriel, always among the last to leave, to find the opportunity of shooting back the bolts before leaving with the porter by the main door. He dared risk it only once a week and the day he chose was Friday.

He would hurry home, eat his solitary meal beside the gas fire in his bed-sitting-room, then make his way back to the building and let himself in by the side door. All that was necessary was to make sure he was waiting for the office to open on Monday morning so that, among the first in, he could lock the side door before the porter made his

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ritual visit to unlock it for the day's deliveries.

These Friday nights became a desperate but shameful joy to Gabriel. Their pattern was always the same. He would sit crouched in old Mr. Bootman's low leather chair in front of the fireplace, his shoulders hunched over the book in his lap, his eyes following the pool of light from his torch as it moved over each page. He never dared to switch on the room light and even on the coldest night he never lit the gas fire. He was fearful that its hiss might mask the sound of approaching feet, that its glow might shine through the thick curtains at the window, or that, somehow, the smell of gas would linger in the room next Monday morning to betray him. He was morbidly afraid of discovery, yet even this fear added to the excitement of his secret pleasure.

It was on the third Friday in January that he first saw them. It was a mild evening but heavy and starless. An early rain had slimed the pavements and bled the scribbled headlines from the newspaper placards. Gabriel wiped his feet carefully before climbing to the fifth floor. The claustrophobic room smelled sour and dusty, the air struck colder than the night outside. He wondered whether he dare open the window and let in some of the sweetness of the rain-cleansed sky.

It was then that he saw the woman. Below him were the back entrances of the two shops, each with a flat above. One flat had boarded windows, but the other looked lived in. It was approached by a flight of iron steps leading to an asphalt yard. He saw the woman in the glow of a street lamp as she paused at the foot of the steps, fumbling in her handbag. Then, as if gaining resolution, she came swiftly up the steps and almost ran across the asphalt to the flat door.

He watched as she pressed herself into the shadow of the doorway, then swiftly turned the key in the lock and slid out of his sight. He had time only to notice that she was wearing a pale mackintosh buttoned high under a mane of fairish hair and that she carried a string bag of what looked like groceries. It seemed an oddly furtive and solitary homecoming.

Gabriel waited. Almost immediately he saw the light go on in the room to the left of the door. Perhaps she was in the kitchen. He could see her faint shadow passing to and fro, bending and then lengthening. He guessed that she was unpacking the groceries. Then the light in the room went out.

For a few moments the flat was in darkness. Then the light in the upstairs window went on, brighter this time so that he could see the woman more plainly. She could not know how plainly. The curtains were drawn but they were thinner. Perhaps the owners, confident that

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they were not overlooked, had grown careless. Although the woman's silhouette was only a faint blur Gabriel could see that she was carrying a tray. Perhaps she was intending to eat her supper in bed. She was undressing now.

He could see her lifting the garments over her head and twisting down to release stockings and take off her shoes. Suddenly she came very close to the window and he saw the outline of her body plainly. She seemed to be watching and listening. Gabriel found that he was holding his breath. Then she moved away and the light dimmed. He guessed that she had switched off the central bulb and was using the bedside lamp. The room was now lit with a softer, pinkish glow within which the woman moved, insubstantial as a dream.

Gabriel stood with his face pressed against the cold window, still watching. Shortly after eight o'clock the boy arrived. Gabriel always thought of him as "the boy." Even from that distance his youth, his vulnerability, were apparent. He approached the flat with more confidence than the woman but still swiftly, pausing at the top of the steps as if to assess the width of the rain-washed yard.

She must have been waiting for his knock. She let him in at once, the door barely opening. Gabriel knew that she had come naked to let him in. And then there were two shadows in the upstairs room, shadows that met and parted and came together again before they moved, joined, to the bed and out of Gabriel's sight.

The next Friday he watched to see if they would come again. They did, and at the same times, the woman first at twenty minutes past seven, the boy forty minutes later. Again Gabriel stood, rigidly intent at his watching post, as the light in the upstairs window sprang on and then was lowered. The two naked figures, seen dimly behind the curtains, moved to and fro, joined and parted, fused and swayed together in a ritualistic parody of a dance.

This Friday Gabriel waited until they left. The boy came out first, sidling quickly from the half-open door and almost leaping down the steps as if in exultant joy. The woman followed five minutes later, locking the door behind her and darting across the asphalt, her head bent.

After that he watched for them every Friday. They held a fascination for him even greater than Mr. Bootman's books. Their routine hardly varied. Sometimes the boy arrived a little late and Gabriel would see the woman watching motionless for him behind the bedroom curtains. He too would stand with held breath, sharing her agony of impatience, willing the boy to come. Usually the boy carried a bottle under his arm but, one week, it was in a wine basket and he bore it with great care. Perhaps it was an anniversary, a special evening for

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them. Always the woman had the bag of groceries. Always they ate together in the bedroom.

Friday after Friday Gabriel stood in the darkness, his eyes fixed on that upstairs window, straining to decipher the outlines of their naked bodies, picturing what they were doing to each other.

They had been meeting for seven weeks when it happened. Gabriel was late at the building that night. His usual bus did not run and the first to arrive was full. By the time he reached his watching post there was already a light in the bedroom. He pressed his face to the window, his hot breath smearing the pane. Hastily rubbing it clear with the cuff of his coat he looked again. For a moment he thought that there were two figures in the bedroom. But that must surely be a freak of the light. The boy wasn't due for thirty minutes yet. But the woman, as always, was on time.

Twenty minutes later he went into the washroom on the floor below. He had become much more confident during the last few weeks and now moved about the building, silently and using only his torch for light, but with almost as much assurance as during the day. He spent nearly ten minutes in the washroom. His watch showed that it was just after eight by the time he was back at the window, and, at first, he thought that he had missed the boy. But no, the slight figure was even now running up the steps and across the asphalt to the shelter of the doorway.

Gabriel watched as he knocked and waited for the door to open. But it didn't open. She didn't come. There was a light in the bedroom, but no shadow moved on the curtains. The boy knocked again. Gabriel could just detect the quivering of his knuckles against the door. Again he waited. Then the boy drew back and looked up at the lighted window. Perhaps he was risking a low-pitched call. Gabriel could hear nothing but he could sense the tension in that waiting figure.

Again the boy knocked. Again there was no response. Gabriel watched and suffered with him until, at twenty past eight, the boy finally gave up and turned away. Then Gabriel too stretched his cramped limbs and made his way into the night. The wind was rising and a young moon reeled through the torn clouds. It was getting colder. He wore no coat and missed its comfort. Hunching his shoulders against the bite of the wind he knew that this was the last Friday he would come late to the building. For him, as for that desolate boy, it was the end of a chapter.

He first read about the murder in his morning paper on his way to work the following Monday. He recognized the picture of the flat at once although it looked oddly unfamiliar with the bunch of plain-clothes detectives conferring at the

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door and the stolid uniformed policeman at the top of the steps.

The story so far was slight. A Mrs. Eileen Morrisey, aged thirty-four, had been found stabbed to death in a flat in Camden Town late on Sunday night. The discovery was made by the tenants, Mr. and Mrs. Kealy, who had returned late on Sunday from a visit to Mr. Kealy's parents. The dead woman, who was the mother of twin daughters aged twelve, was a friend of Mrs. Kealy. Detective Chief-Inspector William Holbrook was in charge of the investigation. It was understood that the dead woman had been sexually assaulted.

Gabriel folded his paper with the same precise care as he did on any ordinary day. Of course, he would have to tell the police what he had seen. He couldn't let an innocent man suffer no matter what the inconvenience to himself. The knowledge of his intention, of his public-spirited devotion to justice, was warmly satisfying. For the rest of the day he crept around his filing cabinets with the secret complacency of a man dedicated to sacrifice.

But somehow his first plan of calling at a police station on his way home from work came to nothing. There was no point in acting hastily. If the boy were arrested he would speak. But it would be ridiculous to prejudice his reputation and endanger his job before he even knew whether the boy was a suspect. The police might never learn of the boy's existence. To speak up now might only focus suspicion on the innocent. A prudent man would wait. Gabriel decided to be prudent.

The boy was arrested three days later. Again Gabriel read about it in his morning paper. There was no picture this time and few details. The news had to compete with a society elopement and a major air crash and did not make the first page. The inch of newsprint stated briefly: "Denis John Speller, a butcher's assistant, aged nineteen, who gave an address at Muswell Hill, was today charged with the murder of Mrs. Eileen Morrisey, the mother of twelve-year-old twins, who was stabbed to death last Friday in a flat in Camden Town."

So the police now knew more precisely the time of death. Perhaps it was time for him to see them. But how could he be sure that this Denis Speller was the young lover he had been watching these past Friday nights? A woman like that —well, she might have had any number of men. No photograph of the accused would be published in any paper until after the trial. But more information would come out at the preliminary hearing. He would wait for that. After all, the accused might not even be committed for trial.

Besides, he had himself to consider. There had been time to think of his own position. If young Speller's life were in danger, then, of course, Gabriel would tell what he

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had seen. But it would mean the end of his job with Bootman's. Worse, he would never get another. Mr. Maurice Bootman would see to that. He, Gabriel, would be branded as a dirty-minded, sneaking little voyeur, a Peeping Tom who was willing to jeopardize his livelihood for an hour or two with a naughty book and a chance to pry into other people's happiness. Mr. Maurice would be too angry at the publicity to forgive the man who had caused it.

And the rest of the firm would laugh. It would be the best joke in years, funny and pathetic and futile. The pedantic, respectable, censorious Ernest Gabriel found out at last! And they wouldn't even give him credit for speaking up. It simply wouldn't occur to them that he could have kept silent.

If only he could think of a good reason for being in the building that night. But there was none. He could hardly say that he had stayed behind to work late when he had taken such care to leave with the porter. And it wouldn't do to say that he had returned later to catch up with his filing. His filing was always up-to-date as he was fond of pointing out. His very efficiency was against him.

Besides, he was a poor liar. The police wouldn't accept his story without probing. After they had spent so much time on the case they would hardly welcome his tardy revelation of new evidence. He pictured the circle of grim, accusing faces, the official civility barely concealing their dislike and contempt. There was no sense in inviting such an ordeal before he was sure of the facts.

But after the preliminary hearing at which Denis Speller was sent up for trial the same arguments seemed equally valid. By now he knew that Speller was the lover he had seen. There had never really been much room for doubt. By now, too, the outlines of the case for the Crown were apparent. The Prosecution would seek to prove that this was a crime of passion, that the boy, tormented by her threat to leave him, had killed in jealousy or revenge. The accused would deny that he had entered the flat that night, would state again and again that he had knocked and gone away. Only Gabriel could support his story. But it would still be premature to speak.

He decided to attend the trial. In that way he would hear the strength of the Crown's case. If it appeared likely that the verdict would be "Not Guilty" he could remain silent. And if things went badly there was an excitement, a fearful fascination, in the thought of rising to his feet in the silence of that crowded court and speaking out his evidence before all the world. The questioning, the criticism, the notoriety would come later. But he would have had his moment of glory.

He was surprised and a little dis-

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appointed by the Court. He had expected a more imposing, more dramatic setting for justice than this modern, clean-smelling businesslike room. Everything was quiet and orderly. There was no crowd at the door jostling for seats. It wasn't even a popular trial.

Sliding into his seat at the back of the Court, Gabriel looked round, at first apprehensively and then with more confidence. But he needn't have worried. There was no one there he knew. It was really a very dull collection of people, hardly worthy, he thought, of the drama that was to be played out before them. Some of them looked as if they might have worked with Speller or lived in the same street. All looked ill-at-ease with the slightly furtive air of people who find themselves in unusual or intimidating surroundings. There was a thin woman in black crying softly into a handkerchief. No one took any notice of her, no one comforted her.

From time to time one of the doors at the back of the Court would open silently and a newcomer would sidle almost furtively into his seat. When this happened the row of faces would turn momentarily to him without interest, without recognition, before turning their eyes again to the slight figure in the dock.

Gabriel stared too. At first he dared to cast only fleeting glances, averting his eyes suddenly as if each glance were a desperate risk. It was unthinkable that the prisoner's eyes should meet his, should somehow know that here was the man who could save him and should signal a desperate appeal. But when he had risked two or three glances he realized that there was nothing to fear. That solitary figure was seeing no one, caring about no one except himself. He was only a bewildered and terrified boy, his eyes turned inward to some private hell. He looked like a trapped animal, beyond hope and beyond fight.

The Judge was rotund, red-faced, his chins sunk into the bands at his neck. He had small hands which he rested on the desk before him except when he was making notes. Then Counsel would stop talking for a moment before continuing more slowly as if anxious not to hurry his Lordship, watching him like a worried father explaining with slow deliberation to a not very bright child.

But Gabriel knew where lay the power. The Judge's chubby hands, folded on the desk like a parody of a child in prayer, held a man's life in their grasp. There was only one person in the Court with more power than that scarlet-sashed figure high under the carved coat-of-arms. And that was he, Gabriel. The realization came to him in a spurt of exultation, at once intoxicating and satisfying. He hugged his knowledge to himself gloatingly. This was a new sensation, terrifyingly sweet.

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He looked round at the solemn watching faces and wondered how they would change if he got suddenly to his feet and called out what he knew. He would say it firmly, confidently. They wouldn't be able to frighten him. He would say, "My Lord. The accused is innocent. He did knock and go away. I, Gabriel, saw him."

And then what would happen? It was impossible to guess. Would the Judge stop the trial so that they could all adjourn to his chambers and hear his evidence in private? Or would Gabriel be called now to take his stand in the witness box? One thing was certain, there would be no fuss, no hysteria.

But suppose the Judge merely ordered him out of the Court. Suppose he was too surprised to take in what Gabriel had said. Gabriel could picture him leaning forward irritably, hand to his ear, while the police at the back of the Court came silently forward to drag out the offender. Surely in this calm, aseptic atmosphere where justice itself seemed an academic ritual the voice of truth would be merely a vulgar intrusion. No one would believe him. No one would listen. They had set this elaborate scene to play out their drama to the end. They wouldn't thank him for spoiling it now. The time to speak had passed.

Even if they did believe him he wouldn't get any credit now for coming forward. He would be blamed for leaving it so late, for letting an innocent man get so close to the gallows. If Speller were innocent, of course. And who could tell that? They would say that he might have knocked and gone away, only to return later and gain access to kill. He, Gabriel, hadn't waited at the window to see. So his sacrifice would have been for nothing.

And he could hear those taunting office voices: "Trust old Gabriel to leave it to the last minute. Bloody coward. Read any naughty books lately, Archangel?" He would be sacked from Bootman's without even the consolation of standing well in the public eye.

Oh, he would make the headlines all right. He could imagine them: *Outburst in Old Bailey. Man Upholds Accused's Alibi.* Only it wasn't an alibi. What did it really prove? He would be regarded as a public nuisance, the pathetic little voyeur who was too much of a coward to go to the police earlier. And Denis Speller would still hang.

Once the moment of temptation had passed and he knew with absolute certainty that he wasn't going to speak, Gabriel began almost to enjoy himself. After all, it wasn't every day that one could watch British justice at work. He listened, noted, appreciated. It was a formidable case which the prosecution unfolded. Gabriel approved of the prosecuting Counsel. With his high forehead, beaked nose, and bony, intelligent face, he looked so much more distinguished than the Judge.

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This was how a famous lawyer should look. He made his case without passion, almost without interest. But that, Gabriel knew, was how the law worked. It wasn't the duty of prosecuting Counsel to work for a conviction. His job was to state with fairness and accuracy the case for the Crown.

He called his witnesses. Mrs. Brenda Kealy, the wife of the tenant of the flat. A blonde, smartly dressed, common little slut if ever Gabriel saw one. Oh, he knew her type all right. He could guess what his mother would have said about her. Anyone could see what she was interested in. And by the look of her she was getting it regularly too. Dressed up for a wedding. A tart if ever he saw one.

Sniveling into her handkerchief and answering Counsel's questions in a voice so low that the Judge had to ask her to speak up. Yes, she had agreed to lend Eileen the flat on Friday nights. She and her husband went every Friday to visit his parents at Southend. They always left as soon as he shut the shop. No, her husband didn't know of the arrangement. She had given Mrs. Morrisey the spare key without consulting him. There wasn't any other spare key that she knew of. Why had she done it? She was sorry for Eileen. Eileen had pressed her. She didn't think the Morriseys had much of a life together.

Here the Judge interposed gently that the witness should confine herself to answering Counsel's questions. She turned to him. "I was only trying to help Eileen, my Lord."

Then there was the letter. It was passed to the sniveling woman in the box and she confirmed that it had been written to her by Mrs. Morrisey. Slowly it was collected by the Clerk and born majestically across to Counsel, who proceeded to read it aloud.

"Dear Brenda,

We shall be at the flat on Friday after all. I thought I'd better let you know in case you and Ted changed your plans. But it will definitely be for the last time. George is getting suspicious and I must think of the children. I always knew it would have to end. Thank you for being such a pal.

Eileen."

The measured, upper-class voice ceased. Looking across at the jury, Counsel laid the letter slowly down. The Judge bent his head and made another notation. There was a moment of silence in the Court. Then the witness was dismissed.

And so it went on. There was the paper seller at the end of Moulton Street who remembered Speller buying an *Evening Standard* just before eight o'clock. The accused was carrying a bottle under his arm and seemed very cheerful. He had no doubt his customer was the accused.

There was the publican's wife from The Rising Sun at the junction of Moulton Mews and High Street who testified that she served

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the prisoner with a whiskey shortly before half-past eight. He hadn't stayed long. Just long enough to drink it down. He had seemed very upset. Yes, she was quite sure it was the accused. There was a motley collection of customers to confirm her evidence. Gabriel wondered why the prosecution had bothered to call them until he realized that Speller had denied visiting The Rising Sun, had denied that he had needed a drink.

There was George Edward Morrisey, described as an estate agent's clerk, thin-faced, tight-lipped, standing rigidly in his best blue serge suit. He testified that his marriage had been happy, that he had known nothing, suspected nothing. His wife had told him that she spent Friday evenings learning to make pottery at L.C.C. evening classes. The Court tittered. The Judge frowned.

In reply to Counsel's questions Morrisey said that he had stayed at home to look after the children. They were still a little young to be left alone at night. Yes, he had been at home the night his wife was killed. Her death was a great grief to him. Her liaison with the accused had come as a terrible shock. He spoke the word "liaison" with an angry contempt as if it were bitter on his tongue. Never once did he look at the prisoner.

There was the medical evidence—sordid, specific, but mercifully clinical and brief. The deceased had been raped, then stabbed three times through the jugular vein. There was the evidence of the accused's employer who contributed a vague and imperfectly substantiated story about a missing meat screwer. There was the prisoner's landlady who testified that he had arrived home on the night of the murder in a distressed state and that he had not got up to go to work next morning. Some of the threads were thin. Some, like the evidence of the butcher, obviously bore little weight even in the eyes of the prosecution. But together they were weaving a rope strong enough to hang a man.

The defending Counsel did his best but he had the desperate air of a man who knows that he is foredoomed to lose. He called witnesses to testify that Speller was a gentle kindly boy, a generous friend, a good son and brother. The jury believed them. They also believed that he had killed his mistress. He called the accused. Speller was a poor witness, unconvincing, inarticulate. It would have helped, thought Gabriel, if the boy had shown some sign of pity for the dead woman. But he was too absorbed in his own danger to spare a thought for anyone else. Perfect fear casteth out love, though Gabriel. The aphorism pleased him.

The Judge summed up with scrupulous impartiality, treating the jury to an exposition on the nature and value of circumstantial evidence and an interpretation of the expression "reasonable doubt." The

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jury listened with respectful attention. It was impossible to guess what went on behind those twelve pairs of watchful, anonymous eyes. But they weren't out long.

Within forty minutes of the Court rising, they were back, the prisoner reappeared in the dock, the Judge asked the formal question. The foreman gave the expected answer, loud and clear. "Guilty, my Lord." No one seemed surprised.

The Judge explained to the prisoner that he had been found guilty of the horrible and merciless killing of the woman who had loved him. The prisoner, his face taut and ashen, stared wild-eyed at the Judge as if only half hearing. The sentence was pronounced, sounding doubly horrible spoken in those soft judicial tones.

Gabriel looked with interest for the black cap and saw with surprise and some disappointment that it was merely a square of some black material perched incongruously atop the Judge's wig. The jury was thanked. The Judge collected his notes like a businessman clearing his desk at the end of a busy day. The Court rose. The prisoner was taken below. It was over.

The trial caused little comment at the office. No one knew that Gabriel had attended. His day's leave "for personal reasons" was accepted with as little interest as any previous absence. He was too solitary, too unpopular, to be included in office gossip. In his dusty and ill-lit office, insulated by tiers of filing cabinets, he was the object of vague dislike or, at best, of a pitying tolerance. The filing room had never been a center for cosy office chat. But he did hear the opinion of one member of the firm.

On the day after the trial Mr. Bootman, newspaper in hand, came into the general office while Gabriel was distributing the morning mail. "I see they've disposed of our little local trouble," Mr. Bootman said. "Apparently the fellow is to hang. A good thing too. It seems to have been the usual sordid story of illicit passion and general stupidity. A very commonplace murder."

No one replied. The office staff stood silent, then stirred into life. Perhaps they felt that there was nothing more to be said.

It was shortly after the trial that Gabriel began to dream. The dream, which occurred about three times a week, was always the same. He was struggling across a desert under a blood-red sun, trying to reach a distant fort. He could sometimes see the fort clearly although it never got any closer. There was an inner courtyard crowded with people, a silent black-clad multitude whose faces were all turned toward a central platform. On the platform was a gallows. It was a curiously elegant gallows with two sturdy posts at either side and a delicately curved crosspiece from which the noose dangled.

The people, like the gallows, were

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not of this age. It was a Victorian crowd, the women in shawls and bonnets, the men in tophats or narrow-brimmed bowlers. He could see his mother there, her thin face peaked under the widow's veil. Suddenly she began to cry, and as she cried, her face changed and became the face of the weeping woman at the trial. Gabriel longed desperately to reach her, to comfort her. But with every step he sank deeper into the sand.

There were people on the platform now. One, he knew, must be the prison Governor, tophatted, frock-coated, bewhiskered and grave. His clothes were those of a Victorian gentleman but his face, under that luxuriant beard, was the face of Mr. Bootman. Beside him stood the Chaplain in gown and bands and, on either side, were two warders, their dark jackets buttoned high to their necks.

Under the noose stood the prisoner. He was wearing breeches and an open-necked shirt and his neck was as white and delicate as a woman's. It might have been that other neck, so slender it looked. The prisoner was gazing across the desert toward Gabriel, not with desperate appeal but with great sadness in his eyes. And, this time, Gabriel knew that he had to save him, had to get there in time.

But the sand dragged at his aching ankles and although he called that he was coming, coming, the wind, like a furnace blast, tore the words from his parched throat. His back, bent almost double, was blistered by the sun. He wasn't wearing a coat. Somehow, irrationally, he was worried that his coat was missing, that something had happened to it that he ought to remember.

As he lurched forward, floundering through the gritty morass, he could see the fort shimmering in the heat haze. Then it began to recede, getting fainter and farther until at last it was only a blur among the distant sandhills. He heard a high despairing scream from the courtyard—then awoke to know that it was his voice and that the damp heat on his brow was sweat, not blood.

In the comparative sanity of the morning he analyzed the dream and realized that the scene was one pictured in a Victorian newssheet which he had once seen in the window of an antiquarian bookshop. As he remembered, it showed the execution of William Corder for the murder of Maria Marten in the red barn. The remembrance comforted him. At least he was still in touch with the tangible and sane world.

But the strain was obviously getting him down. It was time to put his mind to his problem. He had always had a good mind, too good for his job. That, of course, was why the other staff resented him. Now was the time to use it. What exactly was he worrying about? A woman had been murdered. Whose fault had it been? Weren't there a num-

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ber of people who shared the responsibility?

That blonde tart, for one, who had lent them the flat. The husband who had been so easily fooled. The boy who had enticed her away from her duty to husband and children. The victim herself—particularly the victim. The wages of sin are death. Well, she had taken her wages now. One man hadn't been enough for her.

Gabriel pictured again that dim shadow against the bedroom curtains, the raised arms as she drew Speller's head down to her breast. Filthy. Disgusting. Dirty. The adjectives smeared his mind. Well, she and her lover had taken their fun. It was right that both of them should pay for it. He, Ernest Gabriel, wasn't concerned. It had only been by the merest chance that he had seen them from that upper window, only by chance that he had seen Speller knock and go away again.

Justice was being served. He had sensed its majesty, the beauty of its essential rightness, at Speller's trial. And he, Gabriel, was a part of it. If he spoke now an adulterer might even go free. His duty was clear. The temptation to speak had gone forever.

It was in this mood that he stood with the small silent crowd outside the prison on the morning of Speller's execution. At the first stroke of eight he, like the other men present, took off his hat. Staring up at the sky high above the prison walls he felt again the warm exultation of his authority and power. It was on his behalf, it was at his, Gabriel's, bidding that the nameless hangman inside was exercising his dreadful craft . . .

But that was sixteen years ago. Four months after the trial the firm, expanding and conscious of the need for a better address, had moved from Camden Town to north London. Gabriel had moved with it. He was one of the few people on the staff who remembered the old building. Clerks came and went so quickly nowadays; there was no sense of loyalty to the job.

When Gabriel retired at the end of the year, only Mr. Bootman and the porter would remain from the old Camden Town days. Sixteen years. Sixteen years of the same job, the same bed-sitting-room, the same half-tolerant dislike on the part of the staff. But he had had his moment of power. He recalled it now, looking round the small sordid sitting room with its peeling wallpaper, its stained boards. It had looked different sixteen years ago.

He remembered where the sofa had stood, the very spot where she had died. He remembered other things—the pounding of his heart as he made his way across the asphalt; the quick knock; the sidling through the half-opened door before she could realize it wasn't her lover; the naked body cowering

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back into the sitting room; the taut white throat; the thrust with his filing bodkin that was as smooth as puncturing soft rubber. The steel had gone in so easily, so sweetly.

And there was something else which he had done to her. But that was something it was better not to remember. And afterward he had taken the bodkin back to the office, holding it under the tap in the washroom until no spot of blood could have remained. Then he had replaced it in his desk drawer with half a dozen identical others. There had been nothing to distinguish it any more, even to his eyes.

It had all been so easy. The only blood had been a gush on his right cuff as he withdrew the bodkin. And he had burned the coat in the office furnace. He still recalled the blast on his face as he thrust it in and the spilled cinders like sand under his feet.

There had been nothing left to him but the key of the flat. He had seen it on the sitting-room table and had taken it away with him. He drew it now from his pocket and compared it with the key from the Estate Agent, laying them side by side on his outstretched palm. Yes, they were identical. They had had another one cut, but no one had bothered to change the lock.

He stared at the key, trying to recall the excitement of those weeks when he had been both judge and executioner. But he could feel nothing. It was all so long ago. He had been fifty then; now he was sixty-six. It was too old for feeling. And then he recalled the words of Mr. Bootman. It was, after all, a very commonplace murder.

On Monday morning the girl in the Estate Office, clearing the mail from the letter box, called to the Manager.

"That's funny! The old chap who took the key to the Camden Town flat has returned the wrong one. This hasn't got our label on it. Unless he pulled it off. Cheek! But why would he do that?"

She took the key over to the Manager's desk, dumping his pile of letters in front of him. He glanced at it casually.

"That's the right key, anyway—it's the only one of that type we still have. Probably the label worked loose and fell off. You should put them on more carefully."

"But I did!" Outraged, the girl wailed her protest. The Manager winced.

"Then label it again, put it back on the board, and for God's sake don't fuss, that's a good girl."

She glanced at him again, ready to argue. Then she shrugged. Come to think of it he had always been a bit odd about that Camden Town flat.

"Okay, Mr. Morrisey," she said.

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a ***COMPLETE*** detective ***SHORT NOVEL*** by

HELEN McCLOY

After fifteen years Stephen Longworth—a new man with a new name—returns to Yarborough. He has two interesting and contradictory characteristics: he was a potential murder victim, and he had already been murdered. Now he wanted to resolve that paradox, to learn the truth—a murder victim investigating his own murder!

A short novel that is the real McCloy—hard and compact in texture with a flashing mosaic of detail and a tantalizing mystery that will keep you reading from first paragraph to last—a case without a clue, without a motive, without evidence, and fifteen years old . . .

OF TIME AND MURDER

by HELEN McCLOY

HIS NAME COULD NOT BETRAY him. They had known him as Frank Bly. He was Stephen Longworth now. Would anyone in Yarborough remember his face? After fifteen years?

He turned to look into the beveled pier glass that came with this apartment at the Waldorf. His hair was flecked with steel-gray now, at thirty-two. At seventeen, when he was last in Yarborough, his hair had been brown, his face plump, his skin tanned by that long summer on the water. His mouth then was a boy's, loose-lipped, plastic as clay. This was another face, lean and pale, with a man's hard mouth. The eyes were still a lively hazel, set wide under slanting brows. Yet they had changed most of all. They had lost a boy's trust in others and doubt in self.

It was years since Bly had thought of going back to Yarborough. By the time he had enough money he was no longer interested. Or thought he wasn't, until he saw her picture in the paper this morning.

An old picture from the files? Or was Tessie really the same after all these years? No photograph ever did her justice. There was nothing pretty about the shape of her features or the shadows they cast, and that was all a camera could catch.

Her enchantment lay in life itself which is motion—her swift step,

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her light breathing, the grace of her hands, the movement of intelligence in her eyes, the various inflections of her voice—and what else? Coloring? Say, rather a sort of bloom or sheen that lay upon her. Instinctively she avoided all soiling of body and spirit. Or so he had thought until that night when he wondered if she could be the one who had tried to kill him.

Again Bly looked at the newspaper picture. A smudge of printers' ink on pulpy newspaper. Tessie, who should have been painted on ivory with a brush of gauze. He reread the caption: *Mrs. Llewellyn Vanbrugh of Yarborough.* But Tessie's married name had been Mrs. Geoffrey Vanbrugh. Llewellyn was her own maiden name. With a thrill of shock he realized what the change meant. She was divorced.

What a fine wavering hairline held the boundary between love and hate! Did he hate her now, as he hated the others? Was he going back simply to punish all four of them? Or to discover the truth about Tessie? How had she explained to the world Frank Bly's sudden absence that next morning? Was he just another unsolved case of disappearance? An open file, gathering dust in the Missing Persons Bureau of the Yarborough Police Department?

He wouldn't stop at a hotel. He would do in Yarborough as he did in London or Rome, Marrakech or Peking—rent a comfortably furnished house and enter into the life of the place at his leisure.

He glanced at his watch. Dillon, clerk in the law firm that handled his affairs, should be at his desk by now. Bly put through a call:

"Dillon? . . . Longworth speaking. I want you to get hold of a real-estate agent in Yarborough, Pennsylvania, and find me a furnished house for the winter. Nothing big; just ten or fifteen rooms and an acre or so, on the east bank of the river outside the town . . . No, I've never been there—I've just heard about it."

He frowned as he put down the telephone. Almost a slip, that. Frank Bly must remember that Stephen Longworth had never been in Yarborough.

There wouldn't be any of the usual pitfalls involved in the use of a false name. The initials *S. L.* were on all his belongings and it was habit to answer when anyone said "Steve" or "Mr. Longworth." He even signed contracts as Stephen Longworth. All New York knew him under that name, including police and reporters. Outside Yarborough there was no one alive today who had known him as Frank Bly except a few oil prospectors in faraway Persia and his former chief in the OSS.

It was not his incognito alone that gave him confidence. In the last fifteen years he had learned to take care of himself. He smiled a little, remembering the starving

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Arab who tried to stab him in Mosul, the frightened little crook who tried to hold him up in Chicago, the Malay sailor who ran *amok* in Bangkok.

He crossed the living room to one of Marie Laurencin's wan, delicate portraits and swung the picture back on hinges, revealing a wall safe. Inside, in a shallow drawer, lay two guns—the revolver he had carried prospecting in Persia, the automatic he had used overseas during the war. A revolver is accurate and therefore merciful, but it is too big to be concealed. An automatic is inaccurate and therefore merciless, but it can be concealed in the hip pocket of an ordinary suit or even in the palm of the hand. To a crook this advantage outweighs the risk involved—an automatic may jam.

Bly was neither cop nor crook. Merely a potential murder victim. He could use either type of gun, in self-defense.

It was characteristic of the man that he chose the automatic. He had taken risks all his life. And he was not merciful to enemies . . .

After Bly's train left Philadelphia he looked up from his book. He wouldn't have been surprised to see some Yarborough faces. They were always running up to New York for a day or so of shopping. Covertly he studied the younger women. Had Tessie's daughter, little Nan, grown up to be like this or that? How old had she been that summer—five or six? She would be at least twenty now.

The woman in the seat beside him was middle-aged, short and stout with plump, small-boned hands squeezed into tight gloves. Aside from that she was dressed with elegance, all in black except for the brown of her mink scarf and the dark green of her *coq* feather turban. Though the smooth cheeks had a stuffed look, the black eyes sparkled with vitality.

Her eye caught his and she spoke pleasantly. "I beg your pardon, but is the next stop Yarborough?"

"Yes, it's the only stop between Philadelphia and Wilmington."

"Thank you. I should know because I live there. But I so rarely go to New York by train that I've forgotten. You know Yarborough?"

"Only by hearsay." He smiled. "A typical small town."

"A small city," she corrected him gently. "There's a difference."

He laughed. "What difference? There may be more money in Yarborough than in a small town, but I've been told it's as provincial."

"Who told you?"

Some perverse imp tempted him. Why not launch his campaign here and now with a piece of calculated audacity? It was quite possible the gist of this conversation might be repeated to Tessie or to one of her friends. Yarborough was a place where gossip traveled faster than sound.

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Bly answered, "A fellow I met in Cairo during the war. Some years before that he had worked in Yarborough as a boatman for some people named Vanbush or Vanbrugh. His name was Frank Bly."

She must have blanched, for suddenly her lipstick looked artificial, a smear of red grease caking slack lips. Her eyes were shocked, incredulous. She spoke in a whisper: "But that's impossible!"

"What do you mean?" He was as bewildered as she.

"You can't have met Frank Bly during the war. Not the Frank Bly who used to be the Vanbrughs' boatman."

"Why not?"

She swallowed and her full throat quivered. "Because—fifteen years ago Frank Bly was—murdered."

Later that afternoon, after Bly had been driven out to the modern house which was to be his temporary home in Yarborough, he kept returning to that remark. He scarcely listened as the real-estate agent, Mrs. Quinn, pointed out the splendid view of the river. He was wondering if he should have questioned that woman on the train. At the moment it had seemed prudent strategy to murmur, "Oh, really? Then I must have mistaken the name. It couldn't have been Frank Bly I knew in Cairo."

But even now he could not quite repress a shiver. It had been too much like reading your own obituary in the morning paper. Or dreaming that you are in a graveyard, stumbling over a tombstone marked with your own name.

Should he go to the police or the *Yarborough Chronicle* to get details of "the Bly Case," as it was probably called? No, there would be photographs. Police and newspapermen are trained to recognize faces from photographs. Aside from them, his incognito was safer than he had expected. The layman, who sincerely believed Frank Bly was dead, would be almost incapable psychologically of recognizing him in a living man, Stephen Longworth.

"—and the cedar closet is upstairs at the end of the hall, and—"

Smiling, Bly interrupted Mrs. Quinn: "Wasn't there a murder in this neighborhood years ago?"

"Not in this house!" Her face looked like a bulldog's if a bulldog were ever heavily rouged and powdered.

"But there was a murder near here?"

"I suppose you mean that boatman of the Vanbrughs'. The house is a good half mile down the road."

Bly forced the casual note into his voice. "Who was the murderer?"

"He was never caught."

"No question of accident? Or suicide?"

"N-no." Mrs. Quinn hesitated. "There were blows he couldn't have inflicted himself. And the police

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said nothing in the river could have made wounds that shape. His body was in the water five weeks."

Bly felt that shiver of horror again. It might so easily have been his own body. "Who identified the dead man?"

"The Vanbrughs, I suppose. They were the only people around here who really knew the man. I never saw him. I do hope this old story doesn't worry you, Mr. Longworth. After all, it happened years ago. Probably when you were a child. That gray hair doesn't deceive me!"

She prattled on until he managed to get rid of her.

Alone, he lingered on the terrace as twilight silvered sky and water. How often he had gone to sleep in his bunk at the Vanbrughs' boathouse with this same sound in his ears—the ceaseless splash and ripple of the river's swift current.

Whose murdered body had been dragged out of that current fifteen years ago? And why was it identified as Frank Bly?

He had been such an ordinary boy, his father the postmaster in a small Pennsylvania town, his mother the daughter of a bank cashier in the same town. There he had lived all his life until both parents died. After that first winter alone, working days and taking courses at night, he had drifted south to Yarborough, hoping for a summer job in the peach orchards, and finding a better job as boatman.

Not the sort of boy who gets himself murdered. Yet someone had tried to kill him, and later another victim had been buried under his name . . .

The first meeting after his return to Yarborough came sooner than he had hoped. It was at a Field Club dance for the Community Chest. Bly stood in the archway to the ballroom watching the dancers, particularly a tall girl in flaring white taffeta.

Mrs. Quinn sidled up to Bly. "Charming, isn't she? Her name is Nancy Vanbrugh."

Little Nan. He had forgotten that her eyes were tawny, the color of brown sherry by firelight. He had forgotten that her hair was a more golden brown. He did remember the thick golden lashes and the heavy eyelids that gave her such a sleepy look.

They were dancing when she said, "I hear you've been in Persia, Mr. Longworth?"

How impersonal! What would she do if he said, "Nan, don't you remember? I'm Frank, the boy at the boathouse. You once said you were going to marry me when you grew up."

Instead he answered, "I was there for three years."

"I'd like to hear more about it."

"You shall."

A boy her own age cut in. She smiled at Bly over her shoulder as she drifted away.

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He got his hat and gloves and drove home, deeply disturbed. He hadn't thought much about Nan in the last few years. He had no reason to suspect her as he suspected the others. No child of five could have struck those blows. What would happen to Nan when he did discover the one who had struck him, unseen, in the darkness? Vanbrugh was her father; Tessie, her mother.

Two days later, walking through the woods, he was caught in a cloudburst. He had turned back toward the house when he met Nan, riding a big-boned roan. Leather and tweed and whipcord protected her body, but her fair hair was dark with rain.

"It's only a step to my house, Miss Vanbrugh. My housekeeper will give you hot tea and rum."

"I'd love that." She smiled. "Most people call me Nan."

They sat on a bearskin rug in front of a roaring fire while the housekeeper brought hot buttered biscuits and strawberry jam with the tea and rum. Outside, rain lashed against the window.

Nan laughed. "Wonderful! It never rained enough in Arizona to make you appreciate the sunshine. It was like a painted face that never changes color."

"You were there a long time?"

"Ten years. Boarding school. Eight to eighteen. Then college. I haven't been home much."

"If you'd been my daughter I wouldn't have sent you away."

"There were reasons. My parents were divorced. And now I want to hear all about Cairo."

"Cairo?" He hadn't mentioned Cairo to anyone except the woman on the train.

"Someone said you'd been there, too."

"Who?"

"I'm afraid I don't recall." Her eyes slid away from his toward the fire.

He looked at her somberly. She was the one weak place in the Vanbrugh armor. From her he might wring all sorts of artless admissions. Only, he didn't want to. Suddenly he realized she was the weak place in his armor, too. He wouldn't mind hurting the others. But he couldn't hurt them now without hurting Nan . . .

That night after dinner he lingered on the terrace while the moon rose, turning the riverbank into a badly developed photograph of itself.

There had been no moon that other night fifteen years ago. For a long time he had had nightmares about that horror. Now, deliberately, he forced himself to relive it in the waking state.

There had been no intimation of evil then, before darkness fell. Bly had only to close his eyes now and he could still see Tessie Vanbrugh as she had looked that afternoon on the sunlit terrace when the packing case arrived. Her hair was a light brown, straight and long, parted in

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the middle, coiled on her neck. It had the texture and glitter of the finest silk.

Excitement had brought a faint pink into her cheeks delicate as an apple blossom, but the skin at temple and throat was white, laced with violet veins. She had linked arms with her guest. Denise de Beaupré, a small quiet girl from France, dark and sweet as a black cherry.

"Be careful, Frank!" Tessie's voice sang like a taut wire when his ax struck at the heavy timber. "There's an inlaid cabinet inside. It's more than valuable. Unique."

When he wrenched the last plank away he saw pads and rolls of old newspaper stuffed with excelsior lashed to the cabinet with twine, to cushion it against the inside of the case when it was moved. His penknife hacked at the twine. He heard Denise catch her breath. It was almost a cry of pain. "Oh . . ."

"I'll be careful, Miss de Beaupré," he tried to reassure her. But when the last of the padding had fallen away he couldn't help wondering what all the fuss was about.

It was just an oblong chest, standing on four sturdy carved legs held together with a stretcher. The drop-leaf front was a solid slab of dark wood inlaid with paler wood in a pattern of flowers. To Frank they were dull as dead flowers, dried and pressed between the leaves of a book, and they had the same look of flat, faded fragility.

It was then that Geoffrey Vanbrugh came out on the terrace with his neighbor, Dick Strawn. Vanbrugh was the larger man with the deeper voice, almost a handsome man, with his warm, brown eyes and the small beard that he wore because he was an artist and liked to be different from other men.

His eyes glowed as he saw the cabinet. "Denise, are you sure you want to sell? After all, it was your father's and it's perfect."

Denise smiled. "You forget I'm a French teacher with nothing but my salary. I'd much rather have the money."

"Then that's settled." Vanbrugh took Tessie's hand. "Your birthday present, dear."

The apple blossom turned to rose. "Oh, Geoff! I had no idea you were going to buy it!"

Vanbrugh turned to Bly. "Let's move it into the living room, Frank. It's pretty heavy and we must be careful."

"A music cabinet!" Tessie was ecstatic. "For all that sheet music we've been keeping on top of the piano."

"I'll get it." Denise hurried to the piano at the far end of the long room.

Tessie knelt before the cabinet, pulled down the drop leaf. "What's this?" She was looking at a flat parcel of newspaper.

Vanbrugh unwrapped it. "The key. Hand-wrought iron. The

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packers must have wrapped it in paper to keep it from scratching the wood."

"I don't want a huge key like that sticking out and catching my dress every time I pass the cabinet!" said Tessie. "I shall leave it just where it is, in the paper, so it won't scratch anything."

"She pushed the parcel to the back of the shelf and began piling record albums in front of it.

Bly went back to the terrace. Strawn was sitting on the coping.

Bly began to put the loose boards and old newspapers inside the shell of the packing case. "Is that cabinet really valuable Mr. Strawn?"

"Yes, Frank."

"You're sure?"

"It's my business to be sure. You know I'm an art dealer."

"I didn't know. Say, these old newspapers are French."

"You'd expect French packers to use French newspapers for packing, wouldn't you?"

"But these are dated ten years ago!"

"Naturally. The cabinet has been in storage in Paris ever since Miss de Beaupré's father died in 1924."

"Will it be all right if I take the packing case down to the boathouse? I promised little Nan I'd make her a doll's house, and this is just the thing for it."

"I'm sure nobody wants the case."

"All right if I take the papers, too? I studied French last winter at night school."

"Of course."

Vanbrugh came out on the terrace. "Better tune up the cabin cruiser, Frank. We're going on the river."

As Bly turned away he heard Vanbrugh say, "What are you waiting out here for, Dick? Your commission?"

Strawn laughed. "Partly. I don't like to talk money in front of women. Did I tell you Denise wanted half in cash? So she can start a checking account and draw on it immediately without waiting for a check to clear."

"Yes."

It was nearly dark when they brought the cruiser back to the boathouse, where Bly had spent the rest of the afternoon working on Nan's dollhouse. Strawn and Vanbrugh came out of the men's locker room looking worried. Vanbrugh spoke to Bly. "Please come up to my study as soon as the boat is shipshape."

In the study Vanbrugh did most of the talking. He was quiet and pleasant about the whole thing. So was Strawn. It was Bly who became shaken and shrill.

"Mr. Strawn tells me he left five thousand dollars in cash in the men's locker room this afternoon, Frank. Fifty new one-hundred-dollar bills, fresh from the bank. He couldn't take it with him on the river because he was wearing only his bathing suit. Just now, when he went into the locker room, the money was gone."

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"But, Mr. Vanbrugh, I don't know anything about it! I didn't know there was money in that room. I haven't been there since yesterday."

Vanbrugh's friendly brown eyes were more troubled than angry. "I'd much rather you told me the truth, Frank. You know I wouldn't prosecute."

"Neither would I," put in Strawn. "I just want the money back. I'm not a rich man and five-thousand—well, it's five thousand!"

"Maybe a tramp—" faltered Bly.

"How could a tramp get into the boathouse this afternoon without your hearing him? You were there all the time."

"I took the money out of my wallet and wrapped it in paper so nobody would suspect what it was," added Strawn. "Colored paper from an old candy box, lilac and silver."

Vanbrugh went on more vehemently. "You know, Frank, you were practically a tramp yourself when you wandered into Yarborough."

Strawn intervened. "Don't be hard on the boy, Geoff. I was a fool to leave such a sum in an unlocked place. I was just throwing temptation in his way."

"All right." Vanbrugh dropped his voice. "See here, Frank; if you'll give back the money and clear out tonight I won't say anything about it to anyone. Neither will Mr. Strawn. But if you don't do that I shall be forced to call the police."

"But how can I if I haven't got the money?"

There was a heavy silence. Strawn stood leaning against a bookcase, studying lines in the palm of his hand. Vanbrugh sat behind his desk, gaze level, accusing, sure of Bly's guilt, waiting for him to break down.

He broke, but not the way Vanbrugh expected. "What am I going to do?" he sobbed. "I didn't take the money! I don't know anything about it!" He crouched over a chair, shoulders heaving.

Strawn laid a hand on the back of Vanbrugh's chair and leaned down, speaking so softly that Bly couldn't hear what he said. Vanbrugh rose and left Strawn, put a kindly hand on Bly's shoulder.

"Sorry, Frank. Afraid I lost my temper. Take a night to sleep on this, and if the money's back in the locker room tomorrow morning we won't say anything more about it." The firm hand gave Bly's shoulder a little apologetic shake.

"Thanks." Bly struggled to his feet and made for the French door, almost running. "See you in the morning." He stumbled out the door and hurried down the path through the woods to the boathouse. They had both been damned decent, he thought. Most men would have called the police the moment they disovered the money gone, without warning the man they suspected. But they were all

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such decent people—the Vanbrughs and Strawn and Denise de Beaupré—the very nicest people Bly had ever known.

He did not look back when he heard the footsteps behind him. He knew it was one of the four, for no one else used that path. There wasn't another house within twenty miles of the Vanbrughs' home and Strawn's bungalow in those days. The Vanbrughs kept only one servant, an old cook. Bly would have recognized her step by the creak of her shoes. Strawn had no servant. And it wouldn't be Nan. She was always in bed by six.

Bly didn't look back because he wanted to be alone to think things out for himself. If he could get to his bunk in the boathouse and snap off the lights, not one of the four would disturb his apparent sleep. They were considerate in all the obvious ways. If they failed in the less obvious ways that was just because they could not think of him as one of themselves.

Perhaps he wouldn't have cared if he had not fallen under the spell of Tessie Vanbrugh's beauty. It was pain to wonder if, under all her careful kindness, she thought him a stupid, loutish boy who would never be anything but a boatsman. Couldn't she see that this summer was an economic accident? Something that had nothing to do with the real Frank Bly?

He stopped at the edge of the pier. He no longer heard footsteps behind him. No one was following him. It must have been the echo of his own footsteps. He could stand here and smoke a cigarette before he turned into the boathouse.

Two miles across the water he could see the lights shimmering along the opposite shore. The current was running fiercely, slapping the piles of the pier. The wind was brisk. He cupped the match flame in his hands and bent his head to it.

That saved his life. The first smashing blow glanced off his head instead of crushing his skull. The jar threw him off balance. With man's ancient instinct both hands went out, clawing wildly for the branch that wasn't there. His feet slipped. There was a great splash, and then the shock of cold water.

He came up to the surface with a shuddering gasp. He couldn't see. Something sticky gummed his eyelids, trickled down to his lips. From its taste and consistency he knew it was blood.

Arms threshing wildly, his one hand caught a pile of the pier and clung. He got the other hand on the same pile, braced his knees against it, and inched his way up. At last his hand could grope for the edge of the pier above.

He found it and gripped, panting. Another blow crashed, and he heard the bones of his fingers snap. Dazed, he thought, "This is murder."

He couldn't see above the edge of the pier. He couldn't hang on.

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One hand was crippled; the other, slipping. A second fainter splash, and the cold water revived him a little.

He was a good swimmer. He gave himself to the river, hardly making a sound that could be heard above the rushing water, just paddling enough to keep himself moving, head below the surface. The current was taking him. He had a chance of reaching the opposite shore a mile farther downstream. A fighting chance . . .

He waited a long time before he let the water break over his face and looked back at the shore he had left. He could see the Vanbrugh house on top of the hill, lights shining from every window. Hill and trees, boathouse and pier were all one mass of darkness against the faintly luminous sky.

He could not see a human figure. He could not see anything moving. But sound carries far across water, and it was silent out there in midstream, where the river met no obstacles. Now he heard a faraway sound—footsteps ringing hollow on the planks of the pier dwindling as they receded up the path through the woods toward the house.

It was one of them. One of those four decent, considerate people whom he had trusted, the nicest people he had ever known. Their charm, their sensitive gentleness was on the surface—illusion. The secret reality was ugly, desperate, violent.

In some way he didn't understand he had drawn that violence on himself. Somehow, his very existence must threaten one of them without his knowing it. But which one? And how?

It would be his word against theirs. He had no evidence. He hadn't seen who had struck those two blows. Even if he had, who would believe him? In Yarborough they were all known and respected, and he was not. They had money. He had nothing but the shirt and jeans and sneakers he was wearing and a few dollars in his wallet at the boathouse. Police would be impressed by their testimony. A countercharge of attempted murder without supporting evidence would seem like a foolish boy's wild effort to revenge himself.

So he couldn't go back now. But . . . His young jaw hardened. Some day he would go back. Some day . . .

On the terrace a soft footfall slithered over flagstones, and jerked him back to the present. The housekeeper was a shadow among shadows, gaunt in black. "Mr. Longworth, the telephone. Mrs. Vanbrugh."

As he crossed the living room his knees turned to water. Tessie . . .

The wonderful, clear, light voice was the same. "Mr. Longworth? I called to thank you for taking such good care of my little girl this afternoon. We should be so happy if you would dine with us tomorrow. I

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hope this isn't too short notice?"

A voice like pigeons' cooing. A shimmer in the tone like the iridescence of pigeons' plumage.

His own voice sounded harsh by contrast. "Not at all. I shall be delighted."

Back on the terrace, he looked again at the lights along the other shore.

Some day . . .

This was it . . .

The Vanbrugh living room seemed smaller than he remembered it. Everywhere he saw evidence of economic erosion: the neat darn in the faded chintz slip cover, the bald spot in the Mohammedan prayer rug, silver unevenly polished. Fortune had stood still here while time moved on.

Tessie or Nan had done all that could be done to make the room festive for this evening. Long-stemmed red roses in a great bowl of cut crystal. A brisk wood fire on the hearth that brought a blush to the yellowed white woodwork. But these touches were falsely gay, rouge on an old worn face.

The inlaid cabinet was still standing where Bly and Vanbrugh had placed it that last morning fifteen years ago. Bly glanced at it almost resentfully, with an obscure feeling that somehow it had been the starting point of all the trouble.

A man in well-worn tweeds was dozing in a wing chair before the hearth. His hair was brown, but his small beard was a badger mixture of brown and gray. He rose. "I didn't hear you come in. I'm waiting for Tessie. I'm her former husband, Geoffrey Vanbrugh."

"And I'm Stephen Longworth." Bly searched the warm brown eyes for a flicker of recognition. There was none.

From the stair outside came the sound of a footfall. How well Bly remembered that light swift foot that seemed to fall on his heart in the old days. He turned toward the portières. He thought wildly that this was another guest. Not Tessie. Then the ravaged face smiled, and he saw Tessie's ghost among the ruins of her beauty.

She was as wasted as one of the Fates, a haggard old woman in a dress filmy and gray as smoke, which brought out the leaden tones in her parched skin and dull hair. The bloom, the sheen, the glow, so long remembered, were gone with the sunshine of that last summer. All that remained was the buoyant step, the lilting voice, the lightly drawn breath that now seemed to animate a dying woman. Had time alone done all this to Tessie?

"Why, Geoff!" She gave Vanbrugh both hands, but there was pain in her eyes. "I had no idea you were here!"

"I was leaving Key West for New York when I got your telegram. I came here instead." He was looking at her with the same eager light in his eyes. Bly thought, "He still loves her."

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"If you're giving a party tonight —" he began.

"You'll join us!" she interrupted. "Not a party. Just the Strawns and Mr. Longworth."

The Strawns. So Dick Strawn had married some other woman. Had he ever cared for Tessie? After all, there was no evidence he had, except Bly's own jealous imagination.

The doorbell rang. Bly saw Strawn through the portières, in the hall, handing hat and gloves to the maid. His hair was a little thinner, his figure a little thicker, but he still wore that look of world-weary resignation. He came into the room with the woman Bly had met on the train.

Hatless now, her hair was satiny black stitched sparingly with silver. Black lace draped cunningly hid the absence of waistline. Jewels brought out the vital spark in her dark eyes. She tottered across the waxed floor on plump feet squeezed into tiny black slippers.

Tessie was saying, "Mr. Longworth, Mrs. Strawn."

"We've met before. On the train, wasn't it?" There was a ring in her voice like the clashing of swords. "You startled me by saying you had met Frank Bly in Cairo. I was so relieved when you admitted you might have mistaken the name. I'm like Madame du Deffand: I don't believe in ghosts, but I'm afraid of them."

Strawn kissed Tessie's withered hand. "My dear . . . Hello, Geoff; what a pleasant surprise! . . . Mr. Longworth. . . ." Either Strawn believed he was meeting a stranger for the first time or he was a better actor than Bly had ever suspected.

Nan came into the room with a whisper of taffeta. "Why, Father!" She ran to kiss Vanbrugh. "Mother, you didn't tell me he was coming!"

"I didn't know it, myself." Tessie looked gratefully at the maid, who chose that moment to announce dinner . . .

Afterward, in the living room again, Tessie sat in the wing chair pouring coffee. Vanbrugh was on the sofa facing the fire, Mrs. Strawn on his left, Nan on his right. Strawn sat on a hassock close to Tessie. Bly stood, with one hand on the mantelpiece, looking down into the fire. His moment had come. But he waited until the maid left them. Conversation was flagging. That made it easy for him to introduce a new subject.

His voice was idly curious as he went on: "—and, speaking of murder, I wonder who really did kill Frank Bly?"

There was a startled hush. He might have dropped a lighted match or upset a glass of brandy.

Vanbrugh spoke slowly: "Fifteen years is a long time. We'll never know."

Bly kept his voice level. He must speak like Stephen Longworth, a stranger casually interested, tactless

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enough to force the subject on people who had been close to it. "I've gathered that the murderer was never caught. That whets my curiosity. Just who was this Frank Bly? And what actually happened to him? Some of you were witnesses, weren't you?"

"I doubt if we remember details now," said Tessie carefully. "Freud would say we'd forgotten because we didn't want to remember. It was unpleasant. Especially for Nan."

"Oh . . ." Stephen Longworth must show belated embarrassment at this point while Frank Bly watched every face. "I'm sorry. If any of you would rather not discuss it—?" The note of challenge implied a different wording: *If any of you are afraid to discuss it.*

Strawn was quick to scotch the unspoken suspicion. "Why shouldn't we? Nan is grown up now. It doesn't bother you any longer, does it, my dear?"

"Oh, no." But the face Nan turned toward Bly was wan. "I was ill afterward. They had a psychiatrist. And then they sent me away to boarding school and college. I used to have nightmares. But I've outgrown that."

Tessie made a little gesture of dismay. "Why can't we just forget?"

"I wonder if he forgets?" There was awe in Nan's voice.

Bly looked at her sharply. Could she have seen or heard something when she was only five? Something never revealed? That would explain the psychiatrist and the nightmares.

"He? Who?" demanded Mrs. Strawn.

"The murderer, whoever he was. Imagine living for fifteen years with—that."

Strawn smiled sardonically. "It has happened, Nan."

"You're horrid and cynical, Dick," Nan said. "Sometimes I really don't see how you put up with him, Denise!"

"Denise?" faltered Bly.

"Mrs. Strawn," explained Nan.

"I was born a Franchwoman, Mr. Longworth. Denise de Beaupré. I first came to Yarborough as a French teacher at one of the schools here."

"Oh." He had been so sure these four would not recognize him. Yet, illogically, it had not occured to him that he might fail to recognize one of them. Denise had been so different then. Slender and dark, quiet and sweet, the one who smiled and watched and listened while the other three talked.

Now he had a flash of intuition that events were moving too fast to be quite spontaneous. It could not be chance that all the principal actors in the old drama were brought together again so soon after he reached Yarborough.

Which one of them had planned this dinner tonight? Denise, who was so startled at his casual mention of Frank Bly on the train? Nan, who had ridden toward his house yesterday, perhaps hoping to

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meet him? Tessie, who had recently telegraphed Vanbrugh, possibly asking him to return? Or Strawn, who had kept himself in the background?

It was to Strawn that Bly turned now. "You haven't answered my question. Who was Frank Bly? An old friend?"

"Well, Geoff." Strawn looked at Vanbrugh quizzically. "You hired him."

Vanbrugh turned a musing glance on the fire. "I first met Frank Bly one rainy evening in June in a wayside diner. He was on the seat beside me, and he pitched forward in a dead faint. He was starving. I offered him a job for the summer looking after the cabin cruiser I had then, and he jumped at it."

"You should have handed him a ten-dollar bill and wished him luck," remarked Strawn.

"If only you had!" Denise spoke bitterly. "Think what we would have been spared!"

"But I should have lain awake nights wondering what happened to him after the ten-dollar bill was gone," objected Vanbrugh. "So, instead, I brought him home that night in my car."

"I remember." Tessie sighed. "I came to the front door when I heard Geoff's car. The boy was still hungry. I took him into the kitchen and gave him bread and ham."

"And a can of beans." Frank Bly had let the words slip. Now Stephen Longworth added swiftly. "Isn't that standard for starving men—a can of beans?"

"Possibly." Tessie seemed to dislike the flippant tone. "I don't recall giving him beans."

"I took him down to the boathouse with blankets and towels," went on Vanbrugh. "There was a sort of guest house on the upper floor. A big room with three bunks, a shower, and a kitchenette. I paid him seventy-five a month. He saved nearly all of it."

"You were soft, both of you," said Strawn. "And see what happened? Just what you might have expected. You got into the worst trouble of your lives through Frank Bly. Good heavens, Tessie, have you forgotten? Geoff was nearly arrested for his murder! And we still don't know what really happened.

"What did we know about Bly? Nothing—except what he chose to tell us. All that stuff about losing his parents and trying to earn enough money to go to college may have been a pack of lies. He may have been what we call a juvenile delinquent nowadays, a hopeless drifter, and unemployable with a criminal record. When you took that wretched boy into your home you took mystery and violence into your lives."

"Now, Dick," Denise rebuked him gently. "Whatever happened was not Frank Bly's fault. After all, he was the one who suffered most. He was killed."

"People who get murdered al-

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ways do something to provoke it," retorted Strawn. "If not something vicious, then something imprudent."

Words almost welled to Bly's lips. "But I didn't do anything to provoke it—anything!"

Strawn was turning to him for support. "You agree, Longworth?"

Bly smiled wryly. "Do murder victims think so?"

Strawn laughed. "No one knows what they think, once they become victims!"

Bly stifled an impulse to respond, "I'm the one man in the world who does know—a murder victim investigating his own murder." Instead, he spoke as Longworth. "Where was Bly killed?"

Vanbrugh answered, "On the pier, outside our boathouse."

"And when?"

Strawn answered this time. "We don't know the hour, but it must have been the night after the money disappeared."

Tessie had gasped aloud. Denise's eyes had narrowed. But it was Nan who looked from Strawn to her father in surprise and cried out, "The money?"

Vanbrugh was taken aback. "Dick, I've never told anyone else about that. Not even Tessie or Nan."

Strawn looked at Bly. "That was a slip of the tongue, Longworth. The business about the money has been a secret between Vanbrugh and me all these years. But since I did mention it, I see no harm in explaining now. It can't hurt anyone after so long. The truth is that Frank Bly was a thief."

"I don't believe it!" Tessie's voice fluttered, the sound of wings when a bird spies a cat stalking its nest. "And I'd rather talk about something else."

Denise spoke crisply. "I agree. After all, there's nothing any of us can do or say now that will bring Frank Bly back to life!"

"No, Denise; no, Tessie." Strawn looked from one woman to the other. "Now we've started this, we're going to finish it. Otherwise, Mr. Longworth may think we're afraid of the truth. Longworth, you see that inlaid cabinet at the other end of the room?"

"I've been admiring it all evening."

"Shortly before Frank Bly was murdered, Denise learned that I was an art dealer as well as the Vanbrughs' only neighbor. She was their house guest at the time. She showed me a photograph of the cabinet. It was in storage then, in a Paris warehouse with the rest of her family furniture, and she wanted to sell it. Acting as her agent, I sold it to Vanbrugh for ten thousand dollars."

"More than I could afford, even then," put in Vanbrugh. "But—well, look at it, Longworth, and you'll understand why I had to have it. It's a true Sixteenth Century inlay, the kind that preceded marquetry. The kind that looks like embroidery instead of painting. When it was first

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made, the inlaid ivory and fruitwood were stained in vivid Christmas colors—red, green, and white—and it must have been as blithe as Botticelli's *Primavera*. Though the colors have faded, even now you can see the lyrical Renaissance gaiety of the springy lines."

"The cabinet arrived here by barge from Philadelphia," Strawn went on. "One Saturday afternoon, a few hours before Bly disappeared."

"How well I recall that day!" put in Denise. "I was so embarrassed, because the packing case was addressed to 'Mrs. Richard Strawn.' When I wrote my father's lawyer asking him to send me the cabinet, I mentioned that I had just become engaged to Dick. Somehow, he got the idea that were were already married."

"As if it mattered!" Strawn looked at her fondly, then turned back to Bly. "To seal the bargain, Vanbrugh had drawn half the amount in cash from his bank that morning."

"I needed that cash," Denise smiled reminiscently. "I wanted to open charge accounts in several dress shops so I could start buying my trousseau. For that you need a bank's reference. And I didn't want to wait even the short time it takes to clear a deposited check."

Strawn continued, "As soon as Vanbrugh verified Denise's claim that the cabinet was in good condition, he handed the money to me as Denise's agent. The day was hot. Tessie suggested a cruise and swim in the river. I couldn't take the money with me—we were all in bathing suits. And the bank was closed Saturday afternoon. So I left the money in the men's locker room at the boathouse, wrapped in some colored paper I found there. You can guess the rest, Longworth. When we came back from our cruise that package of money was gone."

Denise was aghast. "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Or me?" Tessie looked at Vanbrugh tragically.

"My dear, we were trying to spare you both a rather unpleasant shock," said Vanbrugh. "We talked it over with Bly in my study privately."

"How naïve we were!" Denise smiled ruefully at Tessie. "Do you remember sitting in this room together with cocktails and wondering why the men didn't come out of the study?"

"Yes and I recall hearing voices, though I couldn't catch the words."

"They were still at it when you went upstairs to kiss Nan good night," added Denise. "I stood at the window watching the clouds over the river. I could see the upper floor of the boathouse above the trees, and I noticed there were no lights. I wondered where Frank Bly was, but it didn't occur to me he was in the study."

"Of course, Bly was the obvious suspect," said Strawn. "When we went out on the river he stayed behind at the boathouse. But we

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wanted to give him a chance to make restitution before we called the police."

"It was ghastly." Vanbrugh sighed. "I'll never forget it."

"You'll never forget it!" Bly smiled grimly, and said aloud, "I suppose this Bly denied everything?"

"Of course." Vanbrugh drew a long breath.

"Then you both assumed his guilt without any evidence at all, just because he was the most likely person!" Nan was shocked.

"Nan, who else could it have been?" protested Vanbrugh. "Every one of us had an interest in the orderly completion of the transaction, except Bly. Dick wanted his commission, your mother and I wanted the cabinet, and Denise wanted the money. There was no one else but Agatha, our cook, and you know that motherly old soul wouldn't be tempted by money. She had all the comforts she wanted. She had no vices and no relatives to prey on her.

"So we gave Bly until morning to return the money. He left the study by a French door, lifting his hand and saying, 'See you tomorrow.' Standing by my desk, I could see him through the window as he walked across the lawn and took the path through the woods to the boathouse. I never saw him again. He simply walked out of our lives, and his last words were a lie: 'See you tomorrow.'"

Strawn nodded. "I said, 'I need a drink. Any liquor in the dining room?' You said, 'Yes. I'll join you in a minute.' But you were a long time coming. I was on my third drink when you drifted in."

"I needed time to think."

To think? Bly's smile curved skeptically. So it really could have been any one of them. Each had been alone when Bly heard the footsteps behind him on the path. Vanbrugh, ostensibly in the study; Strawn, ostensibly in the dining room; Denise, ostensibly in this living room. And Tessie? Had anyone ever thought to ask Nan just when her mother came to kiss her good night that evening or how long her mother had stayed?

"I remember that next morning," resumed Vanbrugh. "A sunny day with a sky blue and white as a della Robbia plaque. I went down to the boathouse early, hoping Bly had put the money back in the locker room. It wasn't there, and neither was Bly. He had left everything, even his own wallet and money. The earth on the pathway was still moist from the night's rain, but there were no footprints. It was inexplicable and frightening, like a horror story."

"Seemed obvious to me," amended Strawn. "He had gone before the rain and taken our money with him."

Bly scowled at Strawn. "So you reported the theft to the police then?"

Vanbrugh answered for Strawn. "No, we didn't."

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"Why not?"

"Tessie believed the boy had drowned during the storm, because she didn't know about the missing money. When I saw how hysterical she was about his death I knew she couldn't stand his arrest for larceny."

"So?" Bly prompted them.

Strawn laughed. "What would you expect of anyone as quixotic as Geoff? He sold some life insurance and gave me four thousand to pay Denise. The least I could do was to waive my commission."

Denise made a comic face. "Then, Geoff, I owe you four thousand."

"Nonsense!" responded Vanbrugh. "I got the cabinet, and it's worth more today than all I paid for it."

"Who found Bly's body?" demanded Bly.

A small voice spoke from the sofa. "I did."

Bly was astonished. "Nan! You?"

Tessie leaned forward, pain in her eyes again. "Nan, dear, I'm sure Mr. Longworth will excuse you."

"He needn't." Nan tossed her shining hair. "It's all so long ago it doesn't upset me now. I was five and a half, going on six. Mother and Father and Denise had gone to a luncheon party Dick was giving at his bungalow down the road, to introduce Denise to his family. Agatha was in the kitchen and I was supposed to play within sight of her window. I soon realized she wasn't paying attention to me. I slipped down the path to the boathouse.

"It was autumn, hot as summer but drier. All the leaves had turned scarlet or yellow, lovely transparent colors that took the sun like stained glass. I felt wonderfully free in the sunlit stillness.

"I took off my shoes and stockings and sat on the pier dangling my feet in the cold water. Then I saw a water spider trying to climb the pile under the pier. I got a stick and leaned over to tickle the insect, and then I saw it—him.

"He was face down, floating in the water under the pier. He was wearing a white shirt and blue jeans and sneakers. I poked at him with the stick. And then"—Nan caught her breath—"I knew he was dead.

"I was screaming when I ran into the kitchen still barefoot. Poor old Agatha thought I had hurt myself."

Tessie shuddered. "Nan was still sobbing when we got home. I remember her words to this day: *'Frank—under the boathouse—he's dead.'*"

"The body was in bad shape," said Vanbrugh. "But it seemed about Bly's weight and height and coloring. And he had been missing for five weeks, just about the time the body had been dead. So there could hardly be any doubt about the identification."

"Was the missing money in his pockets?" asked Bly.

"No." Vanbrugh admitted it uneasily.

Bly persisted. "Did you tell the police about the money then?"

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Strawn shook his head "It seemed wiser to volunteer as little information as possible. Nan was violently ill, the money was gone, and Frank was dead. Geoff didn't want Tessie to know Frank had been a thief. I didn't see how the police could recover the money, for it must have fallen into the water. And then, that theft might have given the police the wrong idea. A quarrel over money that ended in a fist fight, one killing blow, and a body pushed into the water so it would pass for a drowning accident weeks later. That might have been the police case. As it was, they couldn't make a case against any of us. Total absence of motive will create a doubt in the mind of any jury, and the police know that."

"The whole thing will always be a complete mystery," concluded Vanbrugh "Who took the money? And why? Who killed Frank? And why? There's no evidence, no clue, no motive, nothing. Just the money gone and the boy dead, by the hand of some unknown man or woman."

"Woman?" Bly repeated. "Could a woman have inflicted the wounds?"

"Oh, yes." It was Denise who answered. "The police doctor said they looked like hammer blows. It's the weight of a hammer that does the work, not the force of the arm that wields it. Anyone could have murdered Frank Bly, even a child."

Strawn spoke slowly. "If he was murdered."

Tessie gasped. "What do you mean? Suicide?"

Strawn's heavy lids veiled his glance, then he looked up, eyes slyly mocking. "Mind if I tell, Geoff?"

"I suppose not. But why?"

Strawn looked at Bly "I'm going to tell you something I've never told anyone else except Geoff. I don't believe Frank Bly is dead."

Bly knew his self-control must crack in another moment. Had Strawn recognized him, after all?

But Strawn's glance did not rest on Bly. It wandered from face to face and came to rest on Vanbrugh. "Because, four years later, that money was returned to me—anonymously."

Nan cried out, "Oh, Dick, that can't be! Even if Frank were alive he wouldn't return the money unless he took it!"

"Isn't it extremely possible he did take it?" retorted Strawn.

Bly recovered his voice. "How was the money returned?"

"By mail in fifty bills of one hundred dollars each," answered Strawn promptly. "I hadn't kept the numbers of the missing bills. I couldn't tell if these were identical, but the number of bills was significant. It came to my office in a plain white envelope postmarked New York. Not even registered. Then I knew that Frank Bly was alive, that we two must have made a mistake in identifying the body as his. For no one knew about the missing money except Bly, Geoff and myself.

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"I tried other theories. None of them worked. Would Bly's murderer take the money from Bly and then return it to me? No murderer would risk having the money traced back to him. Bly must have run away with the money as we first believed. Who the other man was, who murdered him and why—all that is a puzzle, something we'll never know. But I'm sure Bly went away as far as possible from the scene of his theft, so far that he himself didn't know he was listed as dead in the police records of Yarborough."

"Dick, no!" Nan's clenched knuckles were white on her knees. "Frank Bly wouldn't steal."

"My dear child, you were five years old when you knew him. How could you judge his character then?"

Bly changed the subject. "What became of the money then?"

"What do you suppose?" Strawn was bland. "I gave four thousand to Geoff and kept the rest as my commission on the original transaction."

"And you two never told us." Denise glanced at her husband curiously. "I had no idea you were capable of such—reticence."

Tessie was looking at Vanbrugh. "It proves once more that people can live together for years without ever really knowing each other." Her tone was gentle, but Vanbrugh turned aside abruptly as if she had wounded his feelings.

Strawn defended himself stoutly. "There was nothing to tell. Just another mystery: Who was the dead man? Who killed him and why? And what did become of Frank Bly?"

Denise leaned back in her corner of the sofa, with the calculated art of a Parisian. She was smiling now, teeth even and white against the red lips. She spoke to Bly, her voice soft, faintly derisive. "Isn't it time you told us? Haven't you played with us long enough? What did become of you, Mr. Bly?"

Vanbrugh cried out, "Denise! What on earth—?"

Tessie spoke in a whisper. "Bly?"

Nan closed her lips tightly.

Strawn was looking hard at the stranger. "I've suspected it for the last fifteen minutes. That's why I decided to tell about the return of the money. I didn't want you to think that we were suppressing any of the facts, Bly."

It was a relief to Bly. He stood silent, his back to the fire, facing their intent eyes, watching them as the stunning realization came to one after another.

"I am Frank Bly," he said quietly. "And I am very much alive."

(*continued on page 107*)

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a **Tommy** *and* **Tuppence** *story by*

AGATHA CHRISTIE

It has been quite a long time (more than six years) since we brought you a Tommy and Tuppence Beresford story—in the tradition of "the great ones of the past." You will recall that Tommy and Tuppence opened a detective agency—Blunt's Brilliant Detectives—and began to solve mysteries à la Dr. Thorndyke, Father Brown, Reggie Fortune, Sherlock Holmes, and other famous forerunners. Not exactly parodies, and not exactly pastiches—sort of in-between, leaning more to the broad-burlesque side. In this adventure Tommy and Tuppence emulate the manner and methods of Edgar Wallace . . .

THE CRACKLER

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

"TUPPENCE," SAID TOMMY BERESford, "we shall have to move into a much larger office."

"Nonsense," said Tuppence, "You mustn't get swollen-headed and think you are a millionaire just because you solved two or three twopenny-halfpenny cases with the aid of the most amazing luck."

"What some call luck, others call skill."

"Of course if you really think you are Sherlock Holmes, Dr. Thorndyke, and the Brothers Okewood all rolled into one there is no more to be said. Personally I would much rather have luck on my side than all the skill in the world."

"Perhaps there is something in that," conceded Tommy. "All the same, Tuppence, we do need a larger office."

"Why?"

"The Classics," said Tommy. "We need several hundreds of yards of extra bookshelf if Edgar Wallace is to be properly represented."

"We haven't had an Edgar Wallace case yet."

"I am afraid we never shall," said Tommy. "If you notice, he never does give the amateur sleuth much of a chance. It is all stern Scotland Yard kind of stuff—the real thing and no base counterfeit."

Albert appeared at the door.

"Inspector Marriot to see you," the office boy announced.

"The mystery man of Scotland Yard," murmured Tommy.

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"The busiest of the Busies," said Tuppence. "Or is it 'Noses'? I always get mixed between Busies and Noses."

The Inspector advanced upon them with a beaming smile of welcome.

"Well and how are things?" he asked breezily. "None the worse for our little adventure the other day?"

"Oh, rather not," said Tuppence. "Too, too marvelous, wasn't it?"

"Well, I don't know that I would describe it exactly that way myself," said Marriot cautiously.

"What has brought you here today, Marriot?" asked Tommy. "Not just solicitude for our nervous system, is it?"

"No," said the Inspector. "It is work for the brilliant Mr. Blunt."

"Ha!" said Tommy. "Let me put my brilliant expression on."

"I have come to make you a proposition, Mr. Beresford. What would you say to rounding up a really big gang?"

"Is there such a thing?" asked Tommy.

"What do you mean, is there such a thing?"

"I always thought that gangs were confined to fiction—like master crooks, and super criminals."

"The master crook isn't very common," agreed the Inspector. "But Lord bless you, sir, there's any amount of gangs knocking about."

"I don't know that I should be at my best dealing with a gang," said Tommy. "The amateur crime, the crime of quiet family life—that is where I flatter myself that I shine. Drama of strong domestic interest. That's the thing—with Tuppence at hand to supply all those little feminine details which are so important, and so apt to be ignored by the denser male."

His eloquence was arrested abruptly as Tuppence threw a cushion at him and requested him not to talk nonsense.

"Will have your little bit of fun, won't you, sir?" said Inspector Marriot, smiling paternally at them both. "If you'll not take offense at my saying so, it's a pleasure to see two young people enjoying life as much as you two do."

"Do we enjoy life?" said Tuppence, opening her eyes very wide. "I suppose we do. I've never thought about it before."

"To return to that gang you were talking about," said Tommy. "In spite of my extensive private practice—Duchesses, millionaires, and all the best charwomen—I might perhaps condescend to look into the matter for you. I don't like to see Scotland Yard at fault. You'll have the *Daily Mail* after you before you know where you are."

"As I said before, you must have your bit of fun. Well, it's like this. There's any amount of forged notes going about just now—hundreds of 'em. The amount of counterfeit Treasury notes in circulation would surprise you. Most artistic bit

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of work it is. Here's one of 'em."

He took a one-pound note from his pocket and handed it to Tommy.

"Looks all right, doesn't it?"

Tommy examined the note with great interest.

"By Jove, I'd never spot there was anything wrong with that."

"No more would most people. Now here's a genuine one. I'll show you the differences—very slight they are, but you'll soon learn to tell them apart. Take this magnifying glass."

At the end of five minutes of coaching, both Tommy and Tuppence were fairly expert.

"What do you want us to do, Inspector Marriot?" asked Tuppence. "Just keep our eyes open for these things?"

"A great deal more than that, Mrs. Beresford. I'm pinning my faith on you to get to the bottom of the matter. You see, we've discovered that the notes are being circulated from the West End. Somebody pretty high up in the social scale is doing the distributing. They're passing them on the other side of the Channel as well. Now there's a certain person who is interesting us. A Major Laidlaw—perhaps you've heard the name?"

"I think I have," said Tommy. "Connected with racing, isn't that it?"

"Yes. Major Laidlaw is pretty well known in connection with the Turf. There's nothing actually against him, but there's a general impression that he's been a bit too smart over one or two rather shady transactions. Men in the know look odd when he's mentioned. Nobody knows much of his past or where he came from. He's got a very attractive French wife who's seen about everywhere with a train of admirers. They must spend a lot of money, the Laidlaws, and I'd like to know where it comes from."

"Possibly from the train of admirers," suggested Tommy.

"That's the general idea. But I'm not so sure. It may be coincidence, but a lot of banknotes have been forthcoming from a certain very smart little gambling club which is much frequented by the Laidlaws and their set. This racing, gambling set get rid of a lot of loose money in notes. There couldn't be a better way of getting it into circulation."

"And where do we come in?"

"This way. Young St. Vincent and his wife are friends of yours, I understand? They're in pretty thick with the Laidlaw set—though not as thick as they were. Through them it will be easy for you to get a footing in the same set in a way that none of our people could attempt. There's no likelihood of their spotting you. You'll have an ideal opportunity."

"What have we got to find out exactly?"

"Where they get the stuff from, if they *are* passing it."

"Quite so," said Tommy. "Major

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Laidlaw goes out with an empty suitcase. When he returns it is crammed to bursting with Treasury notes. How is it done? I sleuth him and find out. Is that the idea?"

"More or less. But don't neglect the lady, and her father, M. Heroulade. Remember the notes are being passed on both sides of the Channel."

"My dear Marriot," exclaimed Tommy reproachfully. "Blunt's Brilliant Detectives do not know the meaning of the word neglect."

"Well, good luck to you," the Inspector said, and departed.

"Slush," said Tuppence enthusiastically.

"Eh?" said Tommy perplexed.

"Counterfeit money," explained Tuppence. "It is always called Slush. I know I'm right. Oh, Tommy, we have got an Edgar Wallace case. At last we are Busies."

"We are," said Tommy, "and we are out to get The Crackler and we will get him good."

"Did you say The Cackler or The Crackler?"

"The Crackler."

"Oh, what is a Crackler?"

"A new word that I have coined," said Tommy. "Descriptive of one who passes false notes into circulation. Banknotes crackle; therefore he is called a Crackler. Nothing could be more simple."

"That is rather a good idea," said Tuppence; "it makes it seem more real. I like the Rustler myself. Much more descriptive and sinister."

"No," said Tommy, "I said the Crackler first and I stick to it."

"I shall enjoy this case," said Tuppence. "Lots of night clubs and cocktails in it. I shall buy some eyelash black tomorrow."

"Your eyelashes are black already," objected her husband.

"I could make them blacker," said Tuppence, "and cherry lipstick would be useful too. That ultra-bright kind."

"Tuppence," said Tommy, "you're a real rake at heart. What a good thing it is that you are married to a sober steady middle-aged man like myself."

"You wait," said Tuppence. "When you have been to the Python Club a bit you mayn't be so sober yourself."

Tommy produced from a cupboard various bottles, two glasses, and a cocktail shaker.

"Let's start now," he said. "We are after you, Crackler, and we mean to get you."

Making the acquaintance of the Laidlaws proved an easy affair. Tommy and Tuppence, young, well-dressed, eager for life and with apparently money to burn, were soon part of that particular coterie in which the Laidlaws were the center.

Major Laidlaw was a tall fair man, typically English in appearance, with a hearty sportsmanlike manner, slightly belied by the hard lines round his eyes and the occa-

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sional quick sideways glance that went oddly with his supposed character. He was a very dexterous card player, and Tommy noticed that when the stakes were high he seldom rose from the table a loser.

Marguerite Laidlaw was quite a different type. She was a charming creature, with the slenderness of a wood nymph and the face of a Greuze picture. Her dainty broken English was fascinating and Tommy felt that it was no wonder most men were her slaves. She seemed to take a great fancy to Tommy from the first, and playing his role, he allowed himself to be swept into her train.

"My Tommee," she would say. "But positively I cannot go without my Tommee. His 'air, eet ees the color of the sunset, ees eet not?"

Her father was a more sinister figure. Very correct, very upright, with his little black beard and his watchful eyes.

Tuppence was the first to report progress. She came to Tommy with ten one-pound notes.

"Have a look at these. They're wrong 'uns, aren't they?"

Tommy examined them and confirmed Tuppence's diagnosis.

"Where did you get them from?"

"That boy, Jimmy Faulkner. Marguerite Laidlaw gave them to him to put on a horse for her. I said I wanted small notes, and gave him a tenner in exchange."

"All new and crisp," said Tommy thoughtfully. "They can't have passed through many hands. I suppose young Faulkner is all right?"

"Jimmy? Oh, he's a dear. He and I are becoming great friends."

"So I have noticed," said Tommy coldly. "Do you really think it is necessary?"

"Oh, it isn't business," said Tuppence cheerily. "It's pleasure. He's such a nice boy. I'm glad to get him out of that woman's clutches. You've no idea of the amount of money she's cost him."

"It looks to me as though he were getting rather a pash for you, Tuppence."

"I've thought the same myself sometimes. It's nice to know one's still young and attractive, isn't it?"

"Your moral tone Tuppence, is deplorably low. You look at these things from the wrong point of view."

"I haven't enjoyed myself so much for years," declared Tuppence shamelessly. "And anyway, what about you? Do I ever see you nowadays? Aren't you living in Marguerite Laidlaw's pocket?"

"Business," said Tommy crisply.

"But she is attractive, isn't she?"

"Not my type," said Tommy. "I don't admire her."

"Liar," laughed Tuppence. "But I always did think I'd rather marry a liar than a fool."

"I suppose," said Tommy, "that there's no absolute necessity for a husband to be either?"

But Tuppence merely threw him a pitying glance and withdrew.

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Among Mrs. Laidlaw's admirers was a simple but extremely wealthy gentleman named Hank Ryder. Mr. Ryder came from Alabama, and from the first he was disposed to make a friend and confidant of Tommy.

"That's a wonderful woman, sir," said Mr. Ryder, following the lovely Marguerite with reverential eyes. "Plumb full of civilization. Can't beat *la gaie France,* can you? When I'm near her I feel as though I was one of the Almighty's earliest experiments. I guess He'd got to get His hand in before He attempted anything so lovely as that perfectly lovely woman."

Tommy agreed politely with these sentiments and Mr. Ryder unburdened himself still further.

"Seems kind of a shame a lovely creature like that should have money worries."

"Has she?" asked Tommy.

"You betcha life she has. Queer fish, Laidlaw. She's skeered of him. Told me so. Daren't tell him about her little bills."

"Are they *little* bills?" asked Tommy.

"Well—when I say little! After all, a woman's got to wear clothes, and the less there are of them the more they cost, the way I figure it out. And a pretty woman like that doesn't want to go about in last season's goods. Cards too, the poor little thing's been mighty unlucky at cards. Why, she lost fifty to me last night."

"She won two hundred from Jimmy Faulkner the night before," said Tommy drily.

"Did she indeed? That relieves my mind some. By the way, there seems to be a lot of dud notes floating around in your country just now. I paid in a bunch at my bank this morning and twenty-five of them were down-and-outers—so the polite gentleman behind the counter informed me."

"That's rather a large proportion. Were they new-looking?"

"New and crisp as they make 'em. Why, they were the ones Mrs. Laidlaw paid over to me, I reckon. Wonder where she got 'em from. One of these toughs at the racetrack as likely as not."

"Yes," said Tommy. "Probably."

"You know, Mr. Beresford, I'm new to this sort of high life. All these swell dames, and the rest of the outfit. Only made my pile a short while back. Came right over to Yurrop to see life."

Tommy nodded. He made a mental note to the effect that with the aid of Marguerite Laidlaw, Mr. Ryder would probably see a good deal of life and that the price charged would be heavy.

Meantime, for the second time, he had evidence that the counterfeit notes were being distributed pretty near at hand, and that in all probability Marguerite Laidlaw was responsible for their distribution.

On the following night he himself was given a proof.

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It was at that small select meeting place mentioned by Inspector Marriot. There was dancing there, but the real attraction of the place lay behind a pair of imposing folding doors. There were two rooms with green baize-covered tables, where large sums changed hands nightly.

Marguerite Laidlaw, rising at last to go, thrust a quantity of small notes into Tommy's hands.

"They are so bulkee, Tommee—you will change them, yes? A beeg note. See my so sweet leetle bag, it bulges him to distraction."

Tommy brought her the hundred-pound note she asked for. Then in a quiet corner he examined the notes she had given him. At least a quarter of them were counterfeit.

But where did she get her supplies from? To that he had as yet no answer. By means of Albert's cooperation he was almost sure that Laidlaw was not the man. His movements had been watched closely and had yielded no result.

Tommy suspected her father, the saturnine M. Heroulade. He went to France fairly often. What could be simpler than to bring the notes across with him? A false bottom to a trunk—something of that kind.

Tommy strolled slowly out of the Club, absorbed in these thoughts, but was suddenly recalled to immediate necessities. Outside in the street was Mr. Hank P. Ryder, and it was clear at once that Mr. Ryder was not strictly sober. At the moment he was trying to hang his hat on the radiator cap of a car, and missing it by some inches every time.

"This goldarned hatshtand, this goldarned hatshtand," said Mr. Ryder tearfully. "Not like that in the Shtates. Man can hang up hish hat every night—every night, sir. You're wearing two hatshs. Never sheen a man wearing two hatsh before. Mush be effect climate."

"Perhaps I've got two heads," said Tommy gravely.

"Sho you have," said Mr. Ryder. "Thatsh odd. Thatsh remarkable fack. Letsh have a cocktail. I guess I'm drunk—constootionally drunk. Cocktailsh—mixed 'em—Angel's Kiss—that's Marguerite—lovely creature, fon' o' me too. Horshes Neck, two Martinis—three Road to Ruinish—no, roadshto roon—mixed 'em all—in a beer mug. Bet me I wouldn't—I shaid—to hell, I shayed—"

Tommy interrupted. "That's all right," he said soothingly. "Now what about getting home?"

"No home to go to," said Mr. Ryder sadly, and wept.

"What hotel are you staying at?" asked Tommy.

"Can't go home," said Mr. Ryder. "Treasure hunt. Swell thing to do. She did it. Whitechapel—White heartsh, white headsn shorrow to the grave—"

"Never mind that," said Tommy. "Where are you—"

But Mr. Ryder became suddenly

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dignified. He drew himself erect and attained a sudden miraculous command over his speech.

"Young man, I'm telling you. Margee took me. In her car. Treasure hunting. English arishtocrashy all do it. Under the cobblestones. Five hundred poundsh. Solemn thought, *'tis* solemn thought. I'm *telling* you, young man. You've been kind to me. I've got your welfare at heart, sir. We Americans—"

Tommy interrupted him this time with even less ceremony.

"What's that you say? Mrs. Laidlaw took you in a car?"

The American nodded with a kind of owlish solemnity.

"To Whitechapel?" Again that owlish nod. "And you found five hundred pounds there?"

Mr. Ryder struggled for words.

"S-she did," he corrected his questioner. "Left me outside. Outside the door. Always left outside. It's kinder sad. Outside—always outside."

"Would you know your way there?"

"I guess so. Hank Ryder don't lose his bearings—"

Tommy hauled him along unceremoniously. He found his own car and presently they were bowling eastward. The cool air revived Mr. Ryder. After slumping against Tommy's shoulder in a kind of stupor, he awoke clear-headed and refreshed.

"Say, boy, where are we?" he demanded.

"Whitechapel," said Tommy crisply. "Is this where you came with Mrs. Laidlaw tonight?"

"It looks kinder familiar," admitted Mr. Ryder looking round. "Seems to me we turned off to the left somewhere down here. That's it—that street there."

Tommy turned off obediently. Mr. Ryder issued directions.

"That's it. Sure. And round to the right. Say, aren't the smells awful? Yes, past that pub at the corner—sharp round, and stop at the mouth of that little alley. But what's the big idea? Are we going to put one over on them?"

"That's exactly it," said Tommy. "We're going to put one over on them. Rather a joke, isn't it?"

"I'll tell the world," assented Mr. Ryder. "Though I'm just a mite hazed about it all," he ended wistfully.

Tommy got out and assisted Mr. Ryder to alight. They advanced into the alley. On the left were the backs of a row of dilapidated houses, most of which had doors opening into the alley. Mr. Ryder came to a stop before one of these doors.

"In here she went," he declared. "It was this door—I'm plumb certain of it."

"They all look alike," said Tommy. "Reminds me of the story of the soldier and the Princess. You remember, they made a cross on the door to show which one it was. Shall we do the same?"

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Laughing, he drew a piece of white chalk from his pocket and made a rough cross low down on the door. Then he looked up at various dim shapes that prowled high on the walls of the alley, one of which was uttering a blood-curdling yowl.

"Lots of cats about," he remarked cheerfully.

"What is the procedure?" asked Mr. Ryder. "Do we step inside?"

"Adopting due precautions we do," said Tommy.

He glanced up and down the alley, then softly tried the door. It yielded. He pushed it open and peered into a dim yard.

Noiselessly he passed through, Mr. Ryder on his heels.

"Gee!" said the latter. "There's someone coming down the alley."

He slipped outside again. Tommy stood still for a minute, then hearing nothing went on. He took a torch from his pocket and switched on the light for a brief second. That momentary flash enabled him to see his way ahead. He pushed forward and tried the closed door ahead of him. That too gave, and very softly he pushed it open and went in.

After standing still a second and listening, he again switched on the torch, and at that flash, as though at a given signal, the place seemed to rise round him. Two men were in front of him, two men were behind him. They closed in on him, and bore him down.

"Lights," growled a voice.

An incandescent gas burner was lit. By its light Tommy saw a circle of unpleasing faces. His eyes wandered gently round the room and noted some of the objects in it.

"Ah!" he said pleasantly. "The headquarters of the counterfeiting industry, if I am not mistaken."

"Shut your jaw," growled one of the men.

The door opened and shut behind Tommy, and a genial and well-known voice spoke.

"Got him, boys. That's right. Now, Mr. Busy, let me tell you you're up against it."

"That dear old word," said Tommy. "How it thrills me. Yes. I am the Mystery Man of Scotland Yard. Why, it's Mr. Hank Ryder. This *is* a surprise."

"I guess you mean that too. I've been laughing fit to bust all this evening—leading you here like a little child. And you so pleased with your cleverness. Why, sonny, I was on to you from the start. You weren't in with that crowd for your health. I let you play about for a while, and when you got real suspicious of the lovely Marguerite, I said to myself, 'Now's the time to lead him to it.' I guess your friends won't be hearing of you for some time."

"Going to do me in? That's the correct expression, I believe."

"You've got a nerve all right. No, we won't attempt violence. Just keep you under wraps, so to speak."

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"I'm afraid you're backing the wrong horse," said Tommy. "I've no intention of being 'kept under wraps', as you call it."

Mr. Ryder smiled genially. From outside a cat uttered a melancholy cry.

"Banking on that cross you put on the door, eh, sonny?" said Mr. Ryder. "I shouldn't if I were you. Because I know that story you mentioned. Heard it when I was a little boy. I stepped back into the alley and if you were there now, you'd observe that every door in the alley is marked with an identical cross."

Tommy drooped his head despondently.

"Thought you were mighty clever, didn't you?" said Ryder.

As the words left his lips a sharp rapping sounded on the door.

"What's that?" he cried, starting.

At the same time an assault began on the front of the house. The door at the back was a flimsy affair. The lock gave way almost immediately and Inspector Marriot appeared in the doorway.

"Well done, Marriot," said Tommy. "You were quite right as to the district. I'd like you to make the acquaintance of Mr. Hank Ryder who knows all the best fairy tales."

"You see Mr. Ryder," he added gently, "I've had my suspicions of you. Albert—that important-looking boy with the big ears is Albert—had orders to follow on his motorcycle if you and I went off joyriding at any time. And while I was ostentatiously marking a chalk cross on the door to engage your attention, I also emptied a little bottle of valerian on the ground. Nasty smell, but cats love it. All the cats in the neighborhood were assembled outside to mark the right house when Albert and the police arrived."

He looked at the dumfounded Mr. Ryder with a smile, then rose to his feet.

"I said I would get you, Crackler, and I have got you," he observed.

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked Mr. Ryder, "What do you mean—Crackler?"

"You will find it in the glossary of the next criminal dictionary," said Tommy. "Etymology doubtful."

He looked round him with a happy smile.

"And all done without a Nose," he murmured brightly. "Good night, Marriot. I must go now to where the happy ending of the story awaits me. No reward like the love of a good woman—and the love of a good woman awaits me at home—that is, I hope it does, but one never knows nowadays. This has been a very dangerous job, Marriot. Do you know Captain Jimmy Faulkner? His dancing is simply too marvelous and as for his taste in cocktails—! Yes, Marriot, it has a been very dangerous job."

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Elena's beauty was nearly perfect; but one day it would fade, even disappear, and she wanted to leave behind her a perfect portrait—so that her beauty would last forever . . .

THE PERFECT PORTRAIT

by KIT REED

For her birthday, George commissioned a portrait by Kitsume, the exquisite Japanese whose life-sized plaster sculpture was the most significant work being done that year. Elena had already been painted by Viota ("The nose, dammit, there's something wrong with the nose") and limned by Amberson ("I just don't think neon's the real *me*"); she had been chipped by Algar, who had nicked away at an enormous piece of green granite for a full eight years, only to have Elena say, "Hans, you are such a peasant. You've made me look so *gross*."

Her beauty was nearly perfect, and she had spent her life waiting for the perfect portrait, the likeness which would end her years of loneliness; mirrors were pale substitutes—she wanted a portrait which would sit like a second self in the room. After the Lafferty bronze fiasco she had almost given up hope.

But now there was Kitsume, and Kitsume worked from life. The Brinners already owned one Kitsume, a tremendously sad plaster butcher who presided over a real cut of meat on a real butcher's block in the Brinners' front hall. Living with Kitsume's butcher was like having an extra member of the family, so perhaps Kitsume could fulfill Elena's lifetime wish.

"Oh, George," she said when he told her, "maybe this will be it."

"It had better be." George looked harried. "When I think of all I've spent, of all these years—"

"It's so important," she said. "My profile, my lines—I've waited so long for someone to capture the ultimate me."

"How about a portrait of me for a change?"

"What?"

"I said, you'd better decide what you're going to wear."

They finally settled on her gold lamé; it was an original that cost a thousand dollars, but it was worth sacrificing for the ultimate portrait. After all, didn't she want to look her best?

Kitsume came with several sacks of plaster of Paris and what appeared to be a tiny cement mixer; he bowed then said, "Yiss. Now. We must begin with the lard."

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"This won't affect the likeness, will it?" she said as they began to grease her.

"No," said George, slapping lard on her bottom. "It'll keep your hair from tearing out by the roots."

They decided finally that the best thing would be to seat her on a kitchen chair—no sense ruining one of the damask ones. Before they seated her they put on the bandages, winding gauze just tight enough to follow her natural lines.

"The shoulders are terribly important," she said. "Libnakov botched the shoulders."

"I know what I am doing," Kitsume said, donning a saffron smock. He stood off, measuring the perspective with his thumb. "I work from toes up, so you can watch."

Kitsume mixed his plaster and began to daub, starting at the toes of her silver boots.

"He's working too fast," she said as the plaster reached her knees. "Kitsume, I can tell you're working too fast."

"I am artist."

"You're going to love it," George said. "It's going to be the ultimate you." He patted Kitsume on the shoulder. "Beautiful work."

"Yiss." Kitsume stood off and squinted past his thumb.

By the time he was halfway up she was sweltering. "It's so hot," she said crossly. "Can't you hurry?"

"I do head last," Kitsume said imperturbably. "Avoid claustlophobia."

"All right, all right, but you be careful about the mouth. I like the butcher, but you botched his mouth."

"The butcher is superb," George said, walking around his wife. "Your best work, Mr. Kitsume."

In the mirror she could see the plaster covering her almost to the shoulders, still and cool as marble. "It's like a furnace in here. Hadn't you better rework that left arm?"

"I like the left arm," George said firmly. He turned to Kitsume. "You do a beautiful left arm."

"Well, let's hurry and get this over with. I can already tell, this isn't going to be it."

"Wait." Kitsume's eyes were like opals. "Prease, you wait."

"Well, hurry up, I tell you—I'm about to roast!"

He did her head last, binding her face in the protective gauze and giving her straws at nostrils and mouth so she could breathe.

"If this isn't it I'll never forgive you," she said, just before the bandage sealed her mouth.

She wasn't able to talk any more after that, because Kitsume was working swiftly; she could feel his small sure hands patting on the plaster; it was already beginning to harden under her chin. She thought to lift a hand to tell him to hurry, but it was too late; the shell on her body had already set. Then Kitsume covered her eyes, her ears, spreading the last bit of plaster on top of her head, and she was alone in the cast.

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Oh, well, she thought, perhaps this would be it. They would saw her out and then there would be two of her—herself, vivid in her beauty, and the portrait, giving that beauty back forever.

But what if the process had altered her in some way?

What if the heat had coarsened her complexion, or the weight had added a few lines to her forehead?

What if the cast took some hair with it when they pulled it away? That Kitsume would pay for it—he and that miserable George.

It was deathly quiet in the cast. She could breathe well enough, but she could neither see nor hear. She tried to imagine what they were doing—talking, reading, finishing that last martini . . . if only she could signal them. If she stayed in here much longer, it might ruin her forever; the cast would assume all her beauty, leaving her an empty shell. When they sawed it off she might stagger out all shriveled, like a mummy, dragging bandages; she might have dwindled to a grease spot. What if they sawed it open and she wasn't there at all?

Please, she thought, please hurry!

She was the only one who was surprised that they didn't saw her out at all. They let her set for several hours, and when she was all finished breathing they sealed the holes and hoisted her into an Eames chair and sold her to the Museum of Modern Art.

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Aird, Catherine	HENRIETTA, WHO?	Doubleday & Co.	$3.95	6/28
Charteris, Leslie	THE SAINT RETURNS	Doubleday & Co.	3.95	6/14
Holton, Leonard	A TOUCH OF JONAH	Dodd, Mead & Co.	3.95	6/10
Kamarck, Lawrence	THE DINOSAUR	Random House	4.50	6/11
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Frome, David	MR. PINKERTON GOES TO SCOTLAND YARD	Popular Library	.60	6/4

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the *NEWEST* mystery story by

NEDRA TYRE

All things considered, Ellen Williams was a contented, well-adjusted, middle-aged widow leading a quiet life—with her pot plants, her volunteer hospital work, the companionship of her cat Thaddeus, her periodic traveling, and her nightly escape into a scary mystery novel in the safety of her apartment. But then, during a brief stopover in Richmond, Virginia, she had an extraordinary adventure—a taste of Southern hospitality that was not at all what she had been led to expect . . .

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MRS. STANDWICK

by NEDRA TYRE

"WHY ON EARTH DIDN'T YOU tell me I was going to stop over in Richmond?" Ellen Williams asked her travel agent as she picked up her tickets and itinerary for her five-day tour of Colonial Williamsburg.

The agent looked at her in astonishment. For years now Mrs. Williams had been sheeplike in accepting without complaint or comment the trips he had arranged for her. She wasn't like other tourists who badgered him with questions about climate, what to wear, what to buy, how much to tip, telephoning him any hour of the day or night about matters he had already covered fully.

"I met a very nice woman from Richmond when I was in Ireland in June," Ellen Williams continued. "If I'd known I was staying over tomorrow night I'd have planned to see her. It's too late now."

Though exactly how Ellen Williams might have arranged to see Mrs. Standwick who had seemed to disappear into thin air was something else again. Mrs. Standwick had not said goodbye, nor had she given Ellen Williams her address. The only reason that Ellen Williams knew she lived in Richmond was a tag on her suitcase printed succinctly STANDWICK, RICHMOND, VIRGINIA.

"I'm sorry," the agent said. "But the Inn in Williamsburg didn't have a room for tomorrow night and I couldn't change your transportation, so I got a reservation for you

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in Richmond. Anyway, I thought you'd like to stop over in Richmond. Lots of people think it has the most beautiful capitol in the country and there are other interesting sights. Besides it'll make a nice break for you before you go on to Williamsburg. Surely you can telephone your friend when you get to Richmond and explain why you weren't able to give her any warning."

That was an apt suggestion surely, and Ellen Williams thanked the agent for it. Yes, she would telephone Mrs. Standwick on her arrival.

Ellen Williams said good afternoon to the agent and went home to pack and do all the last-minute things that had to be done before she began her trip the next morning.

She was a reluctant traveler. If she had her way she would never go any farther from her apartment than she could walk. She wanted nothing more in life than to enjoy middle age in her three rooms, devoting her time to her pot plants, going to the hospital two days a week to do volunteer work, visiting her neighbors, ministering to her cat Thaddeus of no particular lineage but with very aristocratic airs and tastes. Then when night came and she finished her supper and washed the dishes, she liked to settle down and scare herself to death by reading novels of mystery and suspense.

That simple routine was to Ellen Williams the ideal life.

But her two sons had taken it into their heads that she wanted to travel, that she had an insatiable passion for going places, and every time they saw a travel poster that suggested a new place to visit they made plans for her—usually two long trips each year and additional shorter ones, like the upcoming tour of Williamsburg.

They were the kindest, most generous sons alive. They simply did not realize how they disrupted their mother's life by sending her to the four corners of the earth on independent tours or packaged tours or group tours. Mrs. Anderson down the hall was sweet enough to water Ellen Williams' flowers but she really had no knack for it and half of them died by the time Ellen Williams returned. Then Thaddeus the cat was made furious by having to stay at the vet's and it took weeks of cajoling him with special delicacies such as lobster and kidneys before he would so much as deign to sit in the same room with her again.

Everything about traveling was much too upsetting, but she could not get out of it. Once she had tried to lie herself out of a trip by making a vague complaint about her health, and her sons had promptly sent her off to a famous clinic where all the tedious and exhaustive tests showed that she was in perfect health, and after all that she ended up, as booked, attending every per-

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formance of the Salzburg Festival when she didn't even like music.

Well, her sons were wonderful and when they were small they had obeyed her and now she had to obey them. She was proud of their success—Frank was a lawyer and Joseph a banker—and they had both married good-hearted, sensible girls of whom Ellen Williams was very fond. If only her sons would think of something for her to do besides travel! That was their only flaw.

So Ellen Williams set out once again on yet another trip.

Her flight to Richmond was short and uneventful and the travel agent had known what he was talking about when he recommended the capitol. She couldn't remember having seen a simpler, more pleasing building anywhere. After walking around the capitol grounds she had returned to her hotel in the late afternoon. The hotel was an old and elegant one and her room was perfectly nice, except that nothing about it suited her. The light was too dim and besides, the lamp wasn't situated properly for reading; the chair didn't fit her back, the flowers in the wallpaper were purple, the framed engraving of St. John's Church was crooked, and the mirror made her look fat when she weighed only 130 pounds—well, maybe 132.

She was disgruntled and at odds with herself when she thought how nice it would be to see Mrs. Standwick. She riffled through the telephone directory. Only one Standwick was listed, thank goodness. It would have been awkward to go down a long list of Standwicks asking for the one who had been in Ireland in June.

She dialed the number. There was no answer. She got up and straightened the engraving of St. John's Church, but it slid right back to its awry position. She tried to make the armchair more comfortable by putting a bed pillow in it, but that didn't work either. She pulled a paperback from her carryall and began to read, only to find herself yawning. She had never in her life yawned over a murder novel. It was time to take herself in hand. So she wrote post cards to her sons and daughters-in-law telling them of her safe arrival, then went to the coffee shop and ordered an omelet and green salad.

When she got back to her room she telephoned the Standwick number again, but there was still no answer. Maybe Mrs. Standwick, poor thing, like Ellen Williams had been sent by relatives on another tour. Ellen Williams looked at herself in the mirror and appeared to have gained ten pounds, in spite of her light supper. She frowned at her appearance and at everything. If only she could be home with Thaddeus and her plants and her bright lamps and her comfortable chairs and a selection of brand-new mystery novels from the public library.

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She was one of the luckiest women in the world, yet just now she felt like one of the most miserable. She never got into such a mood when she was at home where she belonged. In desperation she left the hotel and window-shopped on Grace and Broad Streets and then she returned to her room and once more dialed the Standwick number. Somehow she hadn't expected an answer, so she was startled when she heard a woman's voice.

"Hello."

"May I speak with Mrs. Standwick, please?"

"This is Mrs. Standwick."

"I hope you're the Mrs. Standwick I know. This is Ellen Williams."

"Who?"

For heaven's sake, Ellen Williams thought, I've never had any trouble with anyone understanding my name before. Ellen is as easy as Mary, and Williams is as simple as Jones or Smith.

"Ellen Williams. I'm at the Adams Hotel briefly and I want to talk with the Mrs. Standwick who was my fellow traveler—"

But Mrs. Standwick did not let her finish. "Yes, yes," she said and then there was a long silence and she said, "I'm afraid you have the wrong number." And abruptly the connection was broken.

Anger made Ellen Williams' hand tremble as she put the telephone back on the hook. She had never been subjected to such unaccountable behavior. The very idea, pretending that Ellen Williams had got a wrong number! Of course that was the Mrs. Standwick she knew. It was Mrs. Standwick's voice and that last sentence gave her away: "I'm afraid you have the wrong number." That was a speech habit of Mrs. Standwick; she often prefaced her statements with "I'm afraid." Ellen Williams remembered so well that she would say, "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you for the butter" or "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to let me pass." I'm afraid this, I'm afraid that.

Nothing distressed Ellen Williams as much as rudeness. Human beings had to live in the same world whatever they might think of each other and they could at least be polite even if they had to lie a little. If Mrs. Standwick didn't want to see her she could at least have made a plausible excuse and managed to exchange a few civil words.

Still Ellen Williams must admit that in their short time together she had become very fond of Mrs. Standwick. True, she was a mousy and colorless woman. Come to think of it, Ellen Williams had no idea how old Mrs. Standwick might be. She was the washed-out type that would look about the same whether she was 30 or 50. Her clothes had no style to them; the material was nice enough, but nothing she wore flattered her and there wasn't enough variety. She had worn one suit and she had only

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two dresses for dinner—not that anybody needed many clothes for a five-day tour from Dublin to Cork to Killarney and then back to Dublin.

Ellen Williams thought of Mrs. Standwick's plain, wistful face. No, whatever the reason for Mrs. Standwick's strangeness on the telephone, she wasn't unkind. There was something shy about her—even sad—and she had seemed to depend on Ellen Williams. They hadn't talked much, except to *oh* and *ah* over the Irish scenery, but they always sat together on the bus and at mealtime. Ellen Williams had felt protective toward her, and then on that last morning in Dublin when everyone was saying goodbye, Ellen Williams had tried to find her but she couldn't. Of course it was a time of confusion, with everybody heading in different directions, eager to make connections; yet everyone had managed a farewell except Mrs. Standwick.

Ellen Williams had felt sure that Mrs. Standwick had left a message for her with someone and that in the hurly-burly of leavetaking it had been forgotten. Ellen Williams had worried about her—well, not really worried, but thought about her on the way home; and then she found six of her prettiest African violets dead and Thaddeus sulking even more than usual and the volunteer chairman at the hospital miffed because the substitute volunteer hadn't been conscientious about taking over, so she hadn't got around to writing any letters, and when she had finally settled down, she saw that Mrs. Standwick hadn't written in her address book, though it had been handed round to everyone and all the other tourists' names were there. Moreover, Mrs. Standwick hadn't passed around an address book of her own—at least, not to Ellen Williams.

The faint light in the hotel room seemed to grow dimmer. Shadows lurked in the corners. The night wind stole in and rattled the blinds. Ellen Williams shivered and glanced at the menacing cover on the mystery paperback. Never before had Ellen Williams applied any of her mystery reading to events in real life. Oh, once she had thought how exciting it would be if Mrs. Randolph, who lived on the second floor and was the most ordinary person in the world, turned out to be a double agent, or how exciting it might be if Mr. Watkins, who made a fool of himself in doting over his wife, was secretly poisoning her.

But somehow her feeling about Mrs. Standwick was altogether different. It wasn't vicarious fear. It was real. She sensed that Mrs. Standwick was scared—badly scared. That telephone conversation, if you could call it a conversation, had been odd, to say the least. First she had said yes, she was Mrs. Standwick, and then in almost the

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next breath she said that Ellen Williams had the wrong number, and had hung up.

Yes, there was something fishy about it, and if Ellen Williams had been at home she would have gone straight to the police; but she couldn't very well go to the police in Richmond and say she'd telephoned someone and had been told she had a wrong number. That would be ridiculous.

Perhaps there was only some slight misunderstanding, but it would be awkward to make another telephone call so soon to try to clear it up. Whatever the circumstances, she somehow couldn't help feeling that Mrs. Standwick would be glad to see her—after all they *had* got along so well. In all her years of touring Ellen Williams had never been so drawn to a fellow traveler as she had been to Mrs. Standwick.

There was only one thing to do—to go see for herself. It might be foolish to set out in the dark in a strange city to find someone under such mysterious conditions, but Ellen Williams was lonely and the night was long, and, above all, she felt uneasy about Mrs. Standwick.

Downstairs in the hotel entrance the doorman pointed in the direction of the street that Ellen Williams inquired about.

"It's just a short walk," he said. "About five or six blocks. Go straight down Franklin—your street crosses Franklin."

Ellen Williams set out briskly and traffic soon thinned. She noticed without concern that she was the only pedestrian. She supposed that Richmond had its share of muggings and that she ought not to risk being out alone in the dark; but the air was bracing and the townhouses which she passed interested her—they were substantial and well kept and their interiors, which she glimpsed between the slats of Venetian blinds or half-drawn draperies, were colorful and attractive.

Earlier than she had expected she reached Mrs. Standwick's street. The house she was seeking was on a corner; it had the same dignity and substance of the other residences she had been admiring and its number was spotlighted in graceful, slender brass figures. At her touch the iron gate swung open and Ellen Williams quickly covered the short walk and mounted the steep steps of the Georgian house. For an instant she caught her breath, then she pushed the bell and it sounded like an alarm. She started at the commotion she had created in the cold silence.

After a while the front door was opened. Ellen Williams had hoped that Mrs. Standwick would greet her and invite her inside for a visit, exclaiming in delight over their reunion. Instead, the woman standing there intimidated Ellen Williams. She seemed disdainful in her perfection. She wore an elaborately

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complicated hairdo and an elegantly simple evening dress, and her throat and left hand were on fire with diamonds.

"Good evening," Ellen Williams said. "I'd like to see Mrs. Standwick, please."

The woman said nothing; she and her diamonds glowered at Ellen Williams.

"Mrs. Standwick does live here, doesn't she?" Ellen Williams' manner was timid and she took a half step in retreat.

A man's voice filled the house shouting, "Who is it?"

The woman turned and walked down the hall toward the gracefully curved stairway and called up the stairwell in answer to the man. "It's someone who has come to see about a contribution."

That remark astonished Ellen Williams. Her retreat ended. She crossed the threshold and approached the woman. "You've misunderstood me," she said. "I certainly don't want any contribution. I just wanted to say hello to Mrs. Standwick. She and I were on a trip together and I—"

There were heavy footsteps upstairs and before Ellen Williams knew what was happening or could finish what she was saying she was shoved inside a room and the door was closed after her.

"I'll be back in a moment," the woman said through the door.

Ellen Williams glanced around the room. It was large and elegant, its furniture was in the French style, and the brilliant chandelier flashed as blindingly as the woman's diamonds. Ellen Williams sat down on a delicate tapestried settee and squinted against the bright lights.

Time seemed to slacken, and then she decided that it was not so much that time was passing slowly as that a lot of time had passed. Studying her watch, she tried to calculate how long she had been in the house. She had left the hotel at 7:00; even though she had sauntered to look at the houses it could not have taken her more than fifteen minutes to reach the Standwick residence.

It was now 7:50. So she had been left alone to cool her heels for more than half an hour. If this was the Richmond brand of Southern hospitality she wanted none of it. She would leave this splendid room immediately and she was tempted to slam the front door behind her.

She grabbed at the slender gold handle of the door. It did not move. She tried to turn it, first to the right and then to the left. It must be stuck. She pulled and pushed.

The door was locked from the outside.

Ellen Williams looked around frantically for another exit. There was no other door. She walked over to a window and pulled the brocaded draperies apart. Darkness lapped outside the window and as her eyes grew accustomed to that

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darkness she saw that light from a street lamp faintly illuminated the yard; the ground was too far beneath her to risk jumping.

She went back to the door and beat on it. "Let me out," she yelled. "Let me out at once!"

From somewhere behind her a hand reached out and clutched her. Ellen Williams screamed and turned to find the woman there. A panel had opened beside the fireplace. There had been another door after all, its outline concealed by the carving of the wainscoting.

Ellen Williams' voice rose in indignation. "What is the meaning of all this? I only wanted to see Mrs. Standwick. She and I were good friends on a tour in Ireland."

The woman ignored what Ellen Williams had said. "Come this way," she ordered. She grasped Ellen Williams by the arm and led her through two unlighted rooms down a narrow passage, and before Ellen Williams was aware of her predicament she was pushed into a small dark room and the door was locked after her.

Everything had happened too quickly. All she could think was that she had been treated like a child who had misbehaved badly and had been shut up in a closet for punishment. For it was a closet to which she had been banished, as she discovered when she reached out to explore her prison and touched various garments hanging from a double row of rods.

She tiptoed and lashed out and came in contact with a shelf crowded with luggage. There must be a light somewhere, but its switch must be outside the locked door; not that a light would do her much good, but she hated the dark.

She groped again. She tapped the wall in every direction, still trying to find a switch, and she cried out in surprise and triumph when she found it and the closet was drowned in light.

Her eyes were dazzled by all the high fashions regimented as to coats, suits, evening dresses, and day clothes. Then Ellen Williams glanced up at the shelf filled with suitcases. One of the cases might as well have shouted Mrs. Standwick's name. She would have recognized it anywhere—she had helped Mrs. Standwick stow it on the rack in the bus every morning and take it down in the late afternoon during their trip. It was shabby and worn like all luggage that had undergone the rigors of a bus tour. It was proof that Mrs. Standwick lived here, was somewhere in this house, and that the awful woman who had pushed her into the closet was trying to keep them apart.

The light pained Ellen Williams' eyes. She was tired from her long day and indignant over what had happened, but there was nothing she could do about her plight for the moment. She must try to make herself as comfortable as she could. She must save her strength so that

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at the next encounter with that woman she could shove instead of being shoved.

Ellen Williams pulled a mink coat from a hanger and spread it on the floor; then she took a sable coat and folded it up for a pillow. She turned off the light and lay down . . .

Something wakened her. She sat up and wondered where she was; a feeling of panic overtook her as it often did when she was away from home and woke up and tried to decide exactly where she was. The fur beneath her startled her. She extended her arms and the hanging clothes swung out as if to attack her—and then she remembered that she was a prisoner in a closet in Richmond, Virginia.

She scrambled up and turned on the light and put the fur coats back on their hangers. Her nap had refreshed her and she was ready for action. She intended to scream her head off and to batter at the locked door of the closet until someone came. She tugged at the door and it opened immediately. No doubt that woman was lurking somewhere in the dark waiting to push Ellen Williams behind another locked door. But Ellen Williams was on to her tricks and ready to give instead of to take, and she intended to find Mrs. Standwick who had to be somewhere in this strange house.

With resolution Ellen Williams stalked out of the closet and invaded one luxurious room after the other calling Mrs. Standwick's name. There was no answer. The house was empty. The elegant woman had left. The man who had shouted from the upstairs had gone. Mrs. Standwick was nowhere in the house.

Ellen Williams left the opulent house with its tomblike silence and walked without fear along the deserted streets. Nothing that might happen to her outside could be as terrifying as what she had already experienced. She was indignant and outraged, and as soon as she could sit down and collect her wits she must decide what to do.

It astonished her to see from the clock in the hotel lobby that it was only 9:00. When she asked for her key the clerk looked at her with concern. "Are you all right, Mrs. Williams?" he asked. "A woman who didn't give her name telephoned about five minutes ago. She said you had been to her house and seemed upset and she wanted to know if you had got back all right."

Anger like a spasm shook Ellen Williams. Her voice squeaked. "Well, if she calls again will you please tell her that I've never felt better in my whole life in spite of the extraordinary welcome she gave me."

When Ellen Williams awoke later than she had intended the next morning, she felt rested and full of purpose. Her duty was clear. Instead of visiting the Valentine Mu-

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seum, as her typed itinerary prescribed, she intended to see the police. It was the only sensible thing to do. Mrs. Standwick had disappeared and very peculiar things had happened to Ellen Williams when she had made inquiries about her. The police must be informed and she mustn't waste another second. She'd better go to them even before she ate breakfast.

She had just put on her hat and was peering out the window to decide whether to take her umbrella when a knock sounded on her door. Someone called her name. She caught her breath when she opened the door and saw who her visitor was.

Mrs. Standwick stood there dressed in her neat, nondescript suit. The battered suitcase in her hand reminded Ellen Williams of those mornings in Ireland when Mrs. Standwick had come by her room holding her suitcase exactly like that, ready to set out for their next destination. The anxiety which had troubled Ellen Williams ever since she had attempted to see Mrs. Standwick suddenly left her, and though she was not usually a demonstrative person she embraced Mrs. Standwick warmly.

"I'm so happy to see you," she said. "I've been terribly worried. I was on my way to the police. Oh, I can't tell you how relieved I am to see that you're all right! I didn't know what that terrible woman had done to you."

Mrs. Standwick was so moved by Ellen Williams' welcome that she began to cry. Tears ran down her cheeks. "I'll try to explain," she said. "Excuse me for a minute." From her handbag she withdrew a plain white handkerchief and dabbed at her reddened eyes. Then she picked up her suitcase and went into the bathroom.

Thank heaven she's safe, Ellen Williams thought, and that was all that mattered—though Mrs. Standwick ought to be persuaded to leave that bizarre household where unsuspecting callers were mauled and thrust into closets.

Time passed but Mrs. Standwick did not emerge from the bathroom.

She's disappeared again, Ellen Williams thought wildly. "Are you all right?" she called out.

The bathroom door opened. But Mrs. Standwick did not come out. It was that other woman heavily made up and dressed in a Chanel suit; slung across her arm was the same mink coat on which Ellen Williams had dozed in the closet.

"Your Mrs. Standwick doesn't exist any longer," the woman said. "I wanted to tell you last night but I couldn't. I was terrified when you telephoned—my husband was in the library with me and I didn't dare let him know that I was talking to someone I'd traveled with in Ireland. He didn't know I'd been there. He thought I'd visited my sister who lives in Italy.

"I mustn't bother you with my

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problems, but my husband won't give me a divorce and he's pathologically jealous. I'm in love with someone and I had a brief, wonderful meeting with him in Dublin before I took the tour. I dressed for it as I'd like to dress all the time —in plain, comfortable clothes; but my husband insists that I wear high fashion.

"I was so sad over saying goodbye to John and you were so kind to me. There was no way to thank you for your sweetness and I didn't even try. I didn't dare give you my address because my husband reads all my mail and I knew that if you wrote he'd find out that I'd been in Ireland. Last night I locked you up to keep you out of his way until we left for a party. He heard you in the sitting room and that's why I moved you to the closet.

"I sneaked back from the party and unlocked the closet door, but my husband missed me and followed me and I rushed back out at once to keep him from coming inside. So I couldn't apologize to you. The party wasn't over until after two and I didn't want to disturb you then. But the very moment my husband left for his office this morning I came to see you. You must forgive me for everything, Mrs. Williams. You must."

Ellen Williams smiled at the beautiful, troubled woman. Of course she forgave her. But this person was a stranger. The woman whom Ellen Williams had liked so much had disappeared forever.

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a *NEW* crime story by

JAMES POWELL

You will either wonder why we published this story or you will think it is one of the most penetrating and revealing stories you have read in a long time . . .

As you read "Maze in the Elevator," think of the world around you. It's terrifying, absolutely terrifying . . . "Ah, you mean life, Mr. Jarvis. You mean what life is all about." Yes, Mr. Jarvis, yes, yes, yes

MAZE IN THE ELEVATOR

by JAMES POWELL

LIGHT DESCENDED, FILLING THE small window in the door. Williams picked up his attaché case and stepped from the dim hallway into the bright interior of the elevator. An old man, an uncommonly short old man with glasses, greeted his arrival with a look of distaste.

As Williams turned to face the closing door and inner grille, he fingered his jaw self-consciously. Was it as grotesque-looking as the dentist's novocaine had made it feel? Reassured, he glanced around. The old man's expression was unchanged. Williams squared his shoulders and watched the floors slip up and out of sight.

Abruptly, like someone coming unexpectedly to the bottom of a flight of stairs, the elevator stopped. The hum of machinery died; the ceiling light went out.

The old man expelled his breath. "If you don't mind," he said with exasperation, "I have better things to do."

Williams turned around. The broad shadows made by the grille and half the window in the door above them fell across the old man's face. "I'm afraid we're stuck," said Williams apologetically.

"Oh, all right," said the old man, "if you must play the farce through to the end, go ahead." He pointed to the red alarm button on the control panel. Williams pushed it. A bell rang faintly somewhere at the bottom of the shaft.

"How long will it be?" demanded the old man.

Williams shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. We might be here for some time." Placing his attaché case upright against a wall,

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he sat down on it and lit a cigarette.

"Why?" demanded the old man.

"Because it's late," said Williams with annoyance. "Because the superintendent may be off somewhere cleaning."

The old man waved the words away with his hand. "I mean what are you people up to?"

"I'm afraid I don't follow you," said Williams.

"Oh, enough! Enough!" said the old man bitterly. "You know Rodriguez is dead and that I killed him."

Williams reached up and punched the alarm button again. "Just my luck," he thought, "to get stuck in an elevator with a crackpot." He rubbed his jaw. "I'm afraid I don't know anyone named Rodriguez," he said casually.

"A fat man," said the old man. "It might have been padding. Shock of black hair. Bushy nostrils. Backs of hands hairy. Rodriguez. Perhaps you didn't know him by that name. Perhaps you people use numbers among yourselves."

"My name is Williams," said Williams. "I'm afraid you've gotten me mixed up with someone else." To end the conversation he turned slightly away from the old man and contemplated his cigarette.

"Well," said the old man impatiently, "aren't you curious why I finally killed one of you. After all, I've known about you people for a long time. I always knew I was different. It was as though I was full and the rest of you were hollow." The old man began to laugh. "As a boy I imagined I was of royal blood, taken from my cradle by loyal retainers on the death of my father, the king, to escape the evil designs of my wicked uncle, the Grand Duke Humbolt.

"I imagined that one day I would find my doorway crowded with hussars in boots and braided shortcoats. A flourish of sabers. 'His Royal Highness and Regent, the wicked Grand Duke Humbolt, is dead! Long live King Raymond!' Then I would be transported back to my kingdom, a land of real people." The old man stopped laughing. "A childish fantasy, of course. But remember, even then I was working with two strikes against me." He paused significantly.

"Two strikes?" said Williams in a weary voice.

The old man tapped his glasses and rose up on his toes. "I have always been myopic and short of stature. I am not unaware how well that serves your needs."

Williams held the alarm button down for a full minute. "Boy," he said. "It's like trying to raise the dead."

The old man began to pace the short width of the elevator, back and forth. "Garbage," he said. "Garbage, that's how I first caught on to what you people were up to. On my way here to my office I used to pass the trucks collecting gar-

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bage. Later on in the day I would sometimes see that very same garbage sitting on another street. A week later that same garbage might be back on the street where I'd seen it first. Those trucks weren't taking it away, they were just moving it around.

"'Now why should that be?' I asked myself. I resolved to keep my poor eyes open and see what else I could discover. Almost at once I noticed something strange about the people passing on the street: they were always the same. Oh, sometimes they wore a beard or pretended to limp. But behind the disguises it was the same people over and over again.

"Then slowly but surely another conviction began to grow: it came to me that when I walked down a street all the buildings were false fronts except the one I entered."

The old man looked at Williams. "To this day I can't figure out how you people know which one I'm going to go into. It's a good trick, I'll give you credit for that. Sometimes, just to trip you up, I'd turn down a street unexpectedly and I could almost hear the hammers and saws in the distance putting the whole thing together just a bit ahead of me, laying down sidewalks and spraying the drab and age on everything. And I'd say to myself. 'If only I could walk a little faster, see a little farther, I'd catch them at it.'"

"That's very interesting," lied Williams. To turn the conversation in a more conventional direction he added, "What line of business are you in, by the way?"

"As if you didn't know," said the old man scornfully. "All right. I'm a button broker. I sit by my telephone. Factory A calls and says it has 50,000 shirt buttons, style BX 103. Then factory B calls and says it wants to buy 50,000 shirt buttons, style BX 103. Sometimes it's the same voice in both cases. I receive a small commission on the sale. Now let me ask you a question: do you carry your change of costume in your attaché case?"

Smiling, Williams stood up and opened his case. It was empty. He turned it upside down, closed it, and sat down again. "Satisfied?" he asked.

The old man smiled back. "Now why would a man carry around an empty attaché case?" he mused. "Could it be part of a disguise?"

"If it's any of your business," said Williams, "I'm what's known as a rising young executive and my company likes to think we take work home at night. So we all leave with our attaché cases. Clear enough?"

The old man shook his head over the explanation and resumed his pacing. "Not counting the builders and maintenance crews," he said, "I calculate there are about a hundred of you people—passers-by, jostlers, the crowders who bunch around on the street. Then you come back as insolent clerks with false sideburns, sullen waiters with putty

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noses, and blind newspaper vendors behind dark glasses. I've seen you all a thousand times.

"For example, I recognize Lucille Pulaski quite often—behind a counter at the five and dime, or done up like a secretary grabbing a quick lunch, or staring intently at nothing on the subway. And I want to say, 'Lucille, admit it wouldn't have been any worse if you'd gone along with me.' But she always looks too bored to understand. Or her brother, the one who was supposed to be a policeman, I think I saw him the other day driving a bus.

"Rodriguez, of course, was always Rodriguez. That was a full-time job. But I've seen you somewhere before, Mr. Williams. As somebody else. It will come to me." The old man seemed to lose himself in thought. Then he shook his head.

"You know," he said, "if you people had acted a bit more like I was the center of things, I might never have realized that I was in fact the center of things. But you were a little too calculating in your indifference to me, a little too anxious to prove you lived happy lives apart from me, that I was only one insignificant person in a city of millions, in a world of billions."

"Let's see if we can't rouse somebody," said Williams. By standing on his attaché case he could just see through the bottom of the window into the empty corridor above. He cursed, got down, and pushed the alarm button angrily.

"How many are up there?" asked the old man. "Are they laughing at my little predicament?"

"There's no one up there," said Williams. The old man smiled. "Why should I lie?" said Williams, sitting down again.

"Why indeed?" said the old man. "Why indeed? What is the point of it all? You know, at first I thought the whole thing was a game—my intelligence pitted against your organization. And for many years I thought I might win. Once I stepped through a doorway into darkness and fell. For a moment, just before I hit the cellar stairs and broke my leg, I remember saying to myself, 'I've won. I've caught them.' I remember on another occasion my pleasure at biting into an apple from a bowl of fruit and finding it was wax.

"I remember dreaming that some day I would turn a corner and find a green field where a street should have been. Behind me would be the backs of all the false-fronted buildings, like a row of billboards. In front of me would be an arch festooned with flowers and marked: 'Finish Line. This Way Out of the Maze.' As I passed through the arch a bell would ring and a voice through a megaphone would say, 'Game to Mr. Jarvis. Mr. Raymond Jarvis wins. Come out, come out, wherever you are.'

"And out you'd come, from behind trees and around corners, all smiling sheepishly because you'd

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met your match. I'm not sure what would have happened after that except that I would have won. When I was a young man that was enough. It gave a meaning to life."

The old man stopped. He stood in the angled shadows and seemed to be wondering his last words. Williams lit another cigarette and cursed his luck again.

"Ah, now I recognize you, Mr. Flax," said the old man gently. "Does it bother you, the place on your cheek where the mole used to be, Mr. Flax of the Benevolent Loan Company?"

Williams had been rubbing his jaw. He dropped his hand.

"And I see you've washed the white powder out of your hair," said the old man. "Do you remember how you liked to rock back and forth in your chair because it squeaked and because you knew I could hear it in my office on the other side of the wall, Mr. Flax?"

"Williams," said Williams. He tapped his cheek. "Novocaine. I've just come from the dentist." Williams opened his mouth and pointed inside.

The old man turned his head away. "We'll get back to you, Mr. Flax," he said darkly. "After all you're not going any place." The old man was pacing back and forth again. "But to return to what I was saying, as I grew older the game started to wear thin. The truth was, I was lonely. Lonely. So when Lucille Pulaski said she was a schoolteacher, I was willing to let it go at that. I was somehow attracted to this plain unimaginative girl of sturdy stock. I took her out for several months.

"Then one evening, while her father and brother drank beer in the kitchen, Lucille and I sat in the living room looking through a book of photographs of cats dressed up in costumes: a nurse cat pushing a perambulator full of kittens in baby clothes; kittens in sailor suits and a cat with epaulettes and an admiral's cocked hat. That sort of thing was very popular at the time.

"'Lucille,' I said, 'I have something important to say.'

"'Yes, Raymond?' she said with a nervous smile.

"'Lucille,' I said, 'let me be perfectly frank. I know everything.' Then I told her just what I've told you, Mr. Flax. 'I know you are one of them, Lucille,' I said as I came to my conclusion. 'But I don't hold that against you. In fact, I want you to marry me.'

"You see, Mr. Flax, I hoped she would defect to my side just a bit. Not completely, of course. I knew that would be expecting too much. I wanted her to become kind of my accomplice, so I wouldn't be so lonely. But as I talked I could see she was terrified I knew so much. She said she was sorry but that she would always look on me as a good friend."

Williams grabbed the grille and shook it violently in both hands. He

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kicked at it with his feet. "Hey, we're stuck up here! Hey, anybody!" The noise died away down the elevator shaft.

Williams stared at the grille, ashamed of his outburst. After all, he was more than a match for the old man. "Still," he thought, sitting down again, "there is strength in madness. Mustn't let him jump me from behind."

"No. It wasn't a game," continued the old man. "At last I realized that I was the butt of an immense bad joke. Someone was out to make me miserable, to torment me. I don't mean one of you people. You aren't clever enough to think up the tortures I've been through. There had to be someone as real as I am behind you all, giving the orders and delighting in it. That was my big discovery—the existence of the Man at the Top.

"He sits at a vast and polished desk in a well-appointed office I call Control Central and reads reports from Rodriguez or whoever else it might be. He summons you in teams, the jostlers, the crowders, the ones trained to look right through me as if I wasn't there. Using a pointer and a street map he explains my itinerary for the day. How does he know what buildings I'm going to go into, Mr. Flax? Does he whisper in my ear when I'm asleep? Well, never mind. It's a good trick, I admit it.

"Then after he has inspected your costumes and sent you out, he leans back with his fingers locked behind his head and smirks into the television screens on the wall where he can watch me cut myself shaving or break a shoelace or sip my foul morning coffee in my little kitchen. He savors my misery like a fine wine.

"What I can't understand is why you people do his bidding. That's what I told Rodriguez. 'Damn it, man,' I said, 'we're all in this thing together. The jailor is as much in jail as the prisoner. What kind of loyalty do you owe to a fiend like that?' But Rodriguez pretended he didn't understand.

"Well, I swore I would find the Man at the Top. I would get him to tell me why—why he was doing all this to me. And then I would shoot him dead." The old man pulled a revolver out of his pocket. "That's why I bought this."

Williams stood up. The gun neatly canceled out his young strength.

The old man laughed. "Strange this courtesy you people show firearms. Rodriguez stood up, too."

He waved the gun. "Yes, for years now I've spent every free minute searching for Control Central. Far and wide. Nooks and crannies. Down alleys and up flights of stairs. Along hallways and through doors. I tried hard and kept you people and your builders on the run. Even the Man at the Top will give me credit for that. 'I'll give Jarvis this,' I'll bet he's said, 'he's a plucky little beggar.'

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"And I am. But I'm starting to feel old and tired. A few years ago I began to despair of even finding him. One day on the subway with all your empty faces crowded around me, I said to myself, 'Well, if I can't find him, at least I can make the rest of you suffer.' I rode that subway back and forth, back and forth. 'We'll see who can last the longest,' I said to myself.

"And all night and well into the morning you people had to get off and come back on again in new disguises. And I was getting through. Your numbers were thinning out. By four in the morning there was only a handful of you left, dozing and nodding. I wanted to shout, 'Have you had enough? Do you give up?' But suddenly I felt so tired myself, so tired, and I knew I had been beaten. I dragged myself off the train and went home.

"But I am not by nature a vindictive man, Mr. Flax. I have always believed that one catches more flies with honey than with vinegar. So I began to hit the night spots—Delmonté's, The Blue Samovar, Luigi's. I would sit alone at my table, smiling, watching you all drinking and dancing in your fine clothes. 'Go ahead,' I'd say to myself. 'Enjoy yourselves. Be happy. You see, Raymond Jarvis isn't such a bad sort after all. He knows all about you. But he's brought you here to have a good time anyway.' "

"But I've never been to any of those places," Williams said earnestly, speaking to the revolver. "They're out of my class."

The old man stamped his foot. "Think. Think."

Williams stopped short. "Wait," he said, smiling nervously. "Come to think of it, I have been to Delmonté's. Once."

The old man nodded with satisfaction.

"Two years ago," said Williams. "I was just starting with the company. One of the supervisors was retiring. The department threw a little party for him at Delmonté's."

The old man nodded. "An elderly man. Fat. With gray hair."

"Thin and bald," said Williams.

"Right," said the old man. "You gave him a gold watch inscribed: *To Good Old What's-His-Name from the Gang.*"

"A musical cigar humidor," said Williams.

"It played *Auld Lang Syne,*" said the old man.

"*Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,*" said Williams.

The old man hummed a few bars of the song. "Right," he said. "It all comes back to me now." Then he waved his hand disparagingly. "But what did it get me, sitting there night after night amid your laughter and good times? Not once did anyone slip over to my table and whisper, 'Mr. Jarvis, all of us want you to know how much we appreciate what you're doing for us. We're sorry we have to keep acting out this pitiless farce, but it's our

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job.' That's all I wanted. I would have smiled and said, 'I understand.'

"I would have said the same thing to Rodriguez if he'd made a clean breast of the whole business. For years his office was across from mine. The Apex Exterminator Company or Wee Winnie Winkie Nightgowns, Inc. or the Benevolent Loan Company might come and go —eh, Mr. Flax with the squeaky chair? But Rodriguez remained. He said he dealt in grain futures and spoke of soy beans and barley. If my business was bad, his was worse. If my business was good, his was better. Rodriguez and I used to play chess together in my office with our doors open so he could hear his phone. Does that surprise you after all I've said?"

"No, no," said Williams eagerly.

"Sometimes I need to relax," said the old man. "Sometimes I pretend that things are the way you want me to believe they are. Rodriguez talked a great deal about Natividad, which he said was the small Latin American republic where he was born. He even showed it to me in an atlas. It was purplish, as I recall. I spent many pleasant hours traveling through the landscape of Rodriguez' mind, admiring the ingenuity of his descriptions.

"I came to know the entire history of this imaginary country—the names of the inland mountains and the rivers that flowed through the jungle. I knew that every time there was a mine cave-in the copper miners would march down off the mountains waving dynamite sticks and every time there was a crop failure the peasants would march up out of the valley waving their machetes. I knew that every Army-Navy Day, depending on whose turn it was, a general or an admiral would stage a coup d'état. I enjoyed hearing Rodriguez carry on. As I say, some days I need to relax."

The old man began to shout. "But today wasn't one of those days! Can you understand, Mr. Flax, that I sometimes get depressed, knowing all I know?" He emphasized the question by wagging the barrel of the revolver at Williams.

"Yes," said Williams. "Yes, indeed."

"This afternoon," shouted the old man, "I had reason to go out into the street and the whole scene never looked so contrived. I felt I could put my fist through all the store fronts and overturn all the papier-mâché automobiles. The people seemed shoddy, like cheap actors who hadn't taken any time over their make-up or costumes.

"I said to myself, 'Does the Man at the top hold me in such contempt? Isn't he making even half an effort to deceive me any more?' Right there in the street I started to shout, 'You people aren't even trying! Deceive me! Deceive me! Put your hearts into it.'" The old man's voice dropped to a whisper. "A

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man in a policeman's uniform called me Mac and told me to go home and sleep it off or he'd run me in.

"For the rest of the afternoon I sat in my office trying to puzzle out what it all meant. Then Rodriguez came in carrying a newspaper and looking grave. Bad news from Natividad. I waved him off. 'Not today, Rodriguez,' I said. 'No games today.'

"But he didn't understand and began to read a news item headlined: *Bloody Strife in Latin American Republic.* A mine cave-in and a crop failure had coincided with Army-Navy Day in Natividad. As the miners with their dynamite and the peasants with their machetes converged on the capital, a dispute erupted between the outgoing admiral and the incoming general. Since the coup d'état hadn't officially taken place, the Army insisted the situation was the Navy's responsibility. Soon soldiers and sailors were battling each other in the streets.

"Meanwhile, the miners and the peasants came face to face where the road down from the mountains met the road up from the valley. An accidentally exploded stick of dynamite triggered a pitched battle. Order was not restored in Natividad until Emiliano Diaz, the postmaster general, armed the postmen and seized the government.

"'An unconstitutional coup d'état by the most ruthless postmaster general in the history of the country,' said Rodriguez. 'This Diaz is a beast. I call him the Mail Animal.'

"That's M-a-i-l," said the old man. "Rodriguez was always making puns like that. But it wasn't for that I killed him.

"'My poor people,' said Rodriguez, the tears streaming down his cheeks. 'Fathers killing sons. Brother killing brother.'

"On other occasions when he had cried while talking of Natividad I had said to myself, 'Bravo, Rodriguez. Bravo. What a performance! To be able to cry over a country that exists only in your mind.' But today I said nothing.

"When his tears had stopped he looked at me strangely. 'You are a hard man, Mr. Jarvis," he said. 'Nothing seems to touch you, though you sometimes pretend otherwise. I've noticed that before. You have no compassion for other people burdened with miseries and injustices.'

"I had to laugh at that. 'You dare talk to *me* of misery and injustice, Rodriguez?' I said. 'You can cry rivers over a fictitious people in a fictitious little country, but you can't shed a single tear for me when you know full well what I'm going through. Damn it, man, we're all in this together.' Et cetera. Et cetera. But Rodriguez pretended he didn't understand. 'All right then,' I said, 'the game is over. I want you to tell me what this is all about.'

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"Rodriguez looked at me curiously. Then he smiled. "Ah, you mean life, Mr. Jarvis. You mean what life is all about,' he said. 'I have often pondered the same question. The way I see it, we have been put here to atone somehow for the mistakes of our fellow men in the past, and to help our fellow men in the present so that future generations will have less to atone for.' And he went on like that, talking to *me* about my fellow men.

"I took this revolver from a drawer and waved it under his nose. 'Enough, Rodriguez,' I said. 'Enough. Tell me what it's all about. Where is the Man at the Top? Where is Control Central? I'll give you till the count of three.'

"The gun seemed to perplex him. 'The Man at the Top?' he said.

" 'That's one,' I said.

" 'Control Central?' he said.

" 'That's two,' I said.

"Rodriguez pretended to look sad. 'My friend Mr. Jarvis, you are very tired,' he said with false solicitude and tried to come around the corner of the desk.

" 'That's three, Rodriguez,' I said. And I shot: Bang! Bang! Bang! He died wondering what the noise was. And yet I liked Rodriguez. Now you, Mr. Flax, I remember you and dislike you intensely. If I were to put the same questions to you and not receive satisfactory answers, I believe I could kill you without batting an eye."

"Look. Look," said Williams quickly. "I'm just a young guy trying to get ahead. I don't—"

The old man cut him off with a wave of the revolver. "I'm deadly serious," he said. "I want answers and I want them now."

Williams was sweating. He searched desperately for something to say.

The old man moved closer. "Not so indifferent to me now, eh, Mr. Flax? At this moment I'd say I was the center of things for you at least, eh, Mr. Flax?"

Williams worked his mouth but his voice was stuck like the elevator in the shaft. When the shout came he thought for a second the voice was his own.

"Anybody up there?" someone shouted from far beneath their feet.

"Tell him there is," said the old man calmly.

Williams was afraid his words would turn into a scream for help. "Yes. Get us down!" he shouted.

"Keep your shirt on," came the answer.

"Well," said the old man, "to return to what you were about to tell me."

"But I don't know," said Williams. "I swear!"

"Too bad," said the old man.

"Look. Look," said Williams urgently, "I think you've really hit on something. I mean about this Man at the Top business and how he's out to fool you. But where you go overboard is thinking you're the

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only one he's trying to fool. I mean maybe there are two of us." Williams stopped, then added weakly, "You and me."

The old man laughed. "I have to laugh at that. You? Why should he go to all that trouble for you?"

A motor hummed. The ceiling light came on and after a tentative jerk the elevator moved downward.

"No," said the old man. "Even Rodriguez came up with a better answer than that. I'm going to shoot you, Mr. Flax. The Man at the Top can throw you on the trash heap or send you back to the factory for a little body work or whatever it is he does."

The elevator stopped at the first floor and the door and grille slid open. "Please," prayed Williams, "let the police or the men in the white suits be there."

The lobby was empty.

"Everybody okay?" came the voice from the basement.

At a signal from the old man, Williams swallowed and forced the panic out of his voice. "Fine, thanks."

"Sorry about that," said the voice.

Suddenly the old man gave Williams a cunning look. Then he stamped his foot. "Yes. Yes," he said triumphantly. "That would be the kind of trick he'd play. That would be a good one on me. For years I've searched far and wide for Control Central. Maybe too far and too wide, eh, Mr. Flax? I've had my office in this building for thirty-five years—but I've never once been in the basement."

He scrutinized Williams' face. "You seem nervous, Mr. Flax. Am I getting warm? Yes, I think I am. Control Central right under my nose all the time." The old man's face glowed with anticipation and he fondled the revolver in both hands. "I am about to come face to face with the Man at the Top. Where I am short, he will be tall. Where my eyes are poor, his will be sharp-sighted. Where I am miserable, he will be contented. He will be everything I have ever wanted to be. But I will kill him nevertheless. I will give him time to repent of what he has done to me and then I will kill him."

The old man waved Williams through the door. "So how can I waste the rest of my bullets on small potatoes like you, Mr. Flax?" he said. "Does that offend you?"

Williams' voice squeaked. He tried again. "No, not at all," he said and backed out of the elevator. He turned and walked carefully toward the street entrance, seeing nothing in front of him, imagining the madman's gun at his back.

"Mr. Flax," said the old man. Williams stopped dead, as though the voice had been a bullet. "You've forgotten your empty attaché case, Mr. Flax," said the old man with amusement.

Williams walked stiffly back, retrieved his case, and stepped out of the elevator again. The old man

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put his finger on the button marked B and smiled. "Kill the head and the body dies," he said. "When I shoot him, perhaps all of you will disappear."

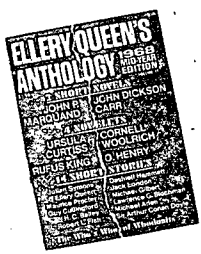
The door closed and the light in the window slid down into the basement.

Williams stood there unable to move until a voice inside him said, "Do something before you disappear." He ran from the crazy idea to the street door. The street was dark, empty except for the wind. A phone booth stood on the corner under a streetlamp. Was it luck? Or had somebody placed the booth there on purpose? Williams hesitated before sprinting over to it.

The voice of the operator who connected him with the police had all the emotion of a recorded message. In the moment while the connection was being made, Williams looked down the empty street and heard the whistle of the wind around the door of the booth. The terrible thought that he was alone cut him to the bone.

"Police headquarters. Sergeant McKenna speaking," came a voice. There was a yawn—"A very healthy, human yawn," thought Williams—between "headquarters" and "Sergeant."

Williams' voice trembled with relief. "Listen," he said, "I know you won't believe this . . ."



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THIS TERRIBLE THING

by MARK VAN DOREN

SALLY ELDRED WAS NOT SURPRISED when her husband failed to come home for dinner at the customary hour. Would he ever come, she wondered? He had telephoned twice to say that the police were swarming all over the university, and the second time he said he had gone with two of them to examine Carlos' apartment. They had found nothing in it that told them anything. The body was gone, of course, but otherwise everything looked as it always had—except that the radio, the nest of tables, and the bust of Socrates were missing from their places.

Naturally. They were what the three boys had been caught with, so they were being held somewhere as evidence. And the heavy poker with which Carlos had been killed—how he did love wood fires, and how proud he was of the antique irons he had brought home last summer from England—that was being worked over, she supposed, in the laboratory downtown. But John had said there were no fingerprints on it.

Poor John! And she added at once, poor Carlos! To have been so suddenly destroyed, and for nothing more than a few objects he would happily have parted with if he had only known—she couldn't go on with it, so she said to herself again, poor John! His first year as chairman of the department—actually, his first month—and then this ghastly thing. One of his best teachers—to lose him like this. But his worst teacher, whoever that was,

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would have been the same. Beaten to death. She still couldn't believe it. The shock to the institution; the shock to John.

And then she heard his step on the porch. Running to open the door for him, she was appalled by the haggardness of the face that looked down into hers.

"Dear!" she said. "You must take off your things and lie down at once —here, on the sofa." She led him into the living room, listening as she did so to make sure that their young sons were out of sight and hearing on the third floor. She helped him with his topcoat, his jacket, his tie, and pressed him down on the cushions. "Poor dear!"

"Poor Carlos," he said.

"Yes, yes. But now—"

"The Inspector didn't show up. I can't understand that." He closed his eyes a moment.

"The Inspector? I'd have thought—"

"He only sent his men. Dozens of them. Hundreds."

"He must be in touch, though. He must know everything that can be known."

"Can be. Good God!"

With that she left him to make the final preparations for dinner. Even if he had no appetite she must go on as usual. For all she knew he might wake up terribly hungry. He could hardly have eaten all day—not since ten o'clock when Carlos was discovered and John called to let her know. Then she had listened to the radio; and this afternoon there had been the papers. *Professor Murdered. Three Youths Held.*

Also, she'd had that call from Fred Monk. So shattered he was, or so he said; and he did sound—well, something or other. She kept thinking about it as she moved about in the kitchen. Fred was so angry, too, at those unspeakable hoodlums, those obscene delinquents—he called them every conceivable name —who killed a good man for trifles they could have taken without violence. A good man, he said over and over, and a fine friend.

What bothered her was that she knew—John certainly knew—how jealous Fred had been since Carlos got his promotion. Carlos Dakin, full professor: Fred would pronounce the name and title as if merely to do so were to indict the university that had honored a man without cause. Fred would never be promoted beyond his present rank; at least most people thought so; and they had reasons. He was lazy, and he got too familiar with his students. Not a bad teacher, but not outstanding either. Furthermore, he disliked Carlos on personal grounds that nobody quite fathomed—an old dislike that was deeper and uglier than envy, supposing anything could be.

Sally went over in her mind Fred's almost hysterical grief. It hadn't rung true. Or had it? Guilt, perhaps, because of a hatred he was only now admitting to himself?

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She would have to tell John about it, for Fred had insisted he was coming over this evening to talk about "this terrible thing." She wished she didn't really have to. John didn't like Fred; he was irritated by him; the very thought of his being here tonight could be too much, she thought, on top of everything else that had happened. John should go to bed and stay there if he could—if the police—

The Inspector. Where was that little man she liked so much? And admired. And sometimes—or so he alleged—helped with his cases. Why hadn't he been with John today? She could almost hear him saying in that crisp voice of his: "Well! Got yourself a scandal out here, haven't you? What do you think? What does your wife think?" As if she had anything to go on. As if there were any problem. Those three boys with Latin-American names. Puerto Rican? She assumed it.

John, surprisingly alert, appeared all at once in the low passage that led into the kitchen. He stooped as usual to come through.

"I couldn't stay down," he said. "Also, I'm hungry."

"I'm glad of that. William and Eddie have had their supper, so we can take our time. It's ready now. But I hoped you would really sleep."

"No, impossible. I keep going over it."

"Of course you do."

"I mean, those boys they caught. Damn it, why *do* they do such things? We try, all of us, to improve their condition; the city spends money, there are meetings, the students do their missionary bit—then this. You know, Sally, what people will be saying: scum is scum, and nothing will ever make any difference. Run them out of town—as if that could be done! Burn the quarter down! Who would do that? Some would love to, I know."

"Fred Monk would."

"What?"

"You should have heard him on the phone today. He was frantic with indignation. He can't get over Carlos' death."

The Professor was silent a few seconds. "He can't? Then why didn't he tell me? I haven't seen Fred all day."

"You have to see him tonight. He's coming over."

"No!"

"He said he was. I tried to make it clear to him how busy you would be. Or tired. But—well, he's coming."

John sighed. "Not soon, I hope."

"Not soon. He spoke of having to pull himself together."

"Quite a job. He should have done it years ago."

At the table in the dining room they returned to the subject. Or Sally did, after some hesitation.

"John, there was something odd about the way Fred carried on. You'd have thought he had lost his best friend."

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John looked at her. "You know he hasn't."

"But you should have heard him. I can't get it out of my mind. He sounded wild, and yet I knew he wasn't. Not really."

"Now what's this?"

"You'll see." She stared at her plate. Something troubled her, and she still didn't know what it was.

When the phone rang they looked at each other before either of them got up to answer it.

"That may be Fred now," said Sally.

"Or the Inspector. This is Thursday—my night to go and see him."

"Silly! Not this night. He wouldn't expect—"

"Who knows?"

He left his chair and went into the hall. "If it's Fred, I'll try to head him off."

But it was the Inspector, he told her when he returned. "He wants me to come down as soon as I can."

"Oh, dear. Not to his house—he wouldn't be there with all this going on."

"No, to headquarters. He didn't say much—"

"When did he ever?"

"He even sounded a bit mysterious."

"Why didn't you beg off for once?"

"No, I'm going. I'll come back as quickly as I can."

"Do, dear, for at least two reasons. You're exhausted. And Fred Monk."

"Damn Fred Monk! What do I care how he feels?"

"If he does feel—what you think."

He was drinking his coffee faster than he should. "What do I think?"

"Why, that he'll be wanting to make up with teary speeches for all the spite he's been guilty of. All the envy. All the hate."

"Now, Sally!"

"Maybe I'm overstating it, but that's what I think you think. Whereas—"

He waited, but she didn't go on. "Well? What do *you* think?"

"I hardly know. Except that it wasn't grief I heard in his voice. It was—"

"What?"

"Fear."

He stood up suddenly. "Nonsense."

"Wait a minute. It wasn't rage, either."

"Rage?"

"At those three boys. You should have heard him go on about them—the rats, the reptiles—"

"Fred would, of course. At bottom he's commonplace."

"But even about that, John, I doubted him."

He laughed. "Too subtle, darling. Fear, though—I'm interested in that. You mean, he imagines being attacked himself sometime?"

"No, I mean—"

"For God's sake, Sally, what do you mean?"

She had followed to help him

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with his coat. "Has it ever occurred to you that murders like this one might only *seem* to be by hoodlums? That somebody who had a real reason for doing it, a personal one, a comprehensible one, might *use* them?"

"Use them? How? Hire them?"

"Not exactly—oh, I don't *know*. But if you want me to tell you what I really think about Fred, it's that he's in this deeper than he ought to be."

"You're not saying he—"

"No, I'm not. But neither am I saying to myself he wasn't there last night."

"Sally!"

"And I want you to tell the Inspector that."

"I can just hear myself."

"Tell him, John." She gave him only her cheek to kiss. "Tell him your way, not mine. Make fun of me all you like, but tell him. And try to get back before Fred comes. I can hardly bear to think of seeing him alone."

He turned back from the top step of the porch. "You're not afraid, are you?"

"No, but—tell the Inspector."

He shrugged and disappeared.

Now! She must clear the table; she must go up to see how William and Eddie were, and start them off to bed; and she must think about what she had been saying. No wonder John was outraged. But then she had to say it, for it was what she had begun to believe. Or suspect, anyway. Or in the dimmest way imagine. Yet how was it possible? Was it a thing that anybody at all could know about for certain?

She could think of nothing else as she went about the house straightening this, dusting that. An hour passed. Another hour—no, not quite—and there in the door was John again, looking less tired than he had before, though in place of that he seemed unaccountably excited.

He had time to tell her only one thing before Fred was on them.

"The Inspector," he said, "has been keeping it dark, but here it is. Those boys didn't steal those things."

She gasped. "You mean they weren't *there*?"

"No. Now listen, Sally. In one sense they did steal them. At least they felt they had. That was why they were running when the patrolman noticed them. Such big things—of course they couldn't conceal them."

The doorbell rang.

"You go," she said. "I can't. For one thing, I've got to take in what you just told me. There was more, wasn't there?"

"Yes, but wait. And let me do the talking."

Fred came in half out of breath. "Sally! John! Thank you for being at home! I never knew before what it would be like to have such friends. The others—somehow I couldn't face them, so I stayed away

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all day. I cut both of my classes—did they tell you that, John?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, but I simply had to."

How weak he sounded, with his high voice, higher than ever, almost singing the words, and with his fine, light features—really fine, thought Sally—working as if they had passed quite out of his control.

But here he was, still at it.

"Friends," he said. "You know, don't you, I've lost my best one in the world."

"Carlos, you mean?" John seemed willing to sound stupid.

"Oh, my God, of course I mean Carlos. We had our differences, but he was the one I could always count on to understand me. And I him, I think—yes, he counted on me to know what he was feeling. Then this!" He twisted his hands. "Those inhuman toads, those vampire bats, those scorpions! Creeping in to steal—that's not so bad—but killing, killing, *killing!* No sense whatever, Sally—you know that. It's of a piece with so many foul crimes their generation perpetrates these days. I've been trying all evening to accept it as—what do you call it?—an act of God. But I'm here now to say I can't. It's an insult to God even to mouth the phrase."

"I never liked it very much myself," said John.

"Certainly not! Who in his right mind would?"

Sally, watching John, wondered what he and the Inspector had discussed. Had he told the Inspector what she wanted him to? And if so, was the Inspector even so much as curious? This thing of the boys not having stolen them—what did that mean? They *felt* they had—more mystifying yet.

But John never looked her way, little as he enjoyed the spectacle that Fred was making of himself. She could see how it disgusted him. An act? A very poor one, if so.

Then John, after glancing at his watch, did turn to her. "The Inspector is coming here in a few minutes."

"*Here?*" But she was glad, oh, she was glad.

"Who's coming?" Fred asked. He was suddenly quiet; he was pale. "Inspector? What kind of inspector?"

"Police, of course," said John.

"Then I must go." Fred, trembling, was already at the door.

"No," said John, "you have to stay. At a time like this they need to see everybody they can."

"But *me!* What could I tell *them?* Or *him?* Just him, I hope. You said they."

"Him first, anyway. There!" All of them could hear a car door slam. "That should be the Inspector."

It was, for after a few seconds the doorbell rang and there he stood.

"Mrs. Eldred, I'm bothering you again."

"Oh, no," said Sally, going quickly to him. "You're very good to see. You always are. But now—"

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"Professor Monk," said John by way of introduction. "A colleague of mine, and therefore of Carlos Dakin. He was here, and I asked him to stay." Fred, as if hypnotized, stood where he was without a word.

"Good," said the Inspector, his bright eyes traveling everywhere about the room. "Good." Then to Sally: "Mrs. Eldred, has John told you the latest?"

"Why, no. At least I don't think he did. There was hardly time. He came, then Mr. Monk did, so if there is any secret—"

"Not here with you people, Mrs. Eldred. Professor Monk is a good friend, with the interests of the university at heart?"

"Of course."

"With all of us," said John, "you can speak as freely as you please."

"Good. Well then, it's this. Those boys were not in Dakin's place last night."

"He did tell me that," said Sally. Fred made no sound.

"Go on, Inspector," said John.

"The boys still don't know where the place is, or who Dakin was. They were found later on with some of his furniture in their possession, but they tell me, and I have more than one reason to believe them, it was left in their hands by a man who took it out of a car near the curb where they were standing and paid them to watch it for him till he came back with more. He said he was moving.

"The boys waited; the man didn't return; so they scooted off with it, thinking they could raise a few dollars on it down the street. Something about their behavior attracted the attention of one of our men and he stopped them for questioning. They felt guilty, of course, and refused to answer. So he took them along, just in time to hear that Dakin had been murdered, and apparently robbed. Then he held them—we're still holding them—Professor Monk, don't you believe this?"

Fred was edging away.

"Too big a piece of luck, you think?" The Inspector's eyes never left him now.

"Luck?" Fred scarcely got the word out. But having done so, he went on. "Luck for the boys that you believe them. Why *do* you, Inspector? I don't quite understand. Creatures like that—"

"Like what? Like these?" he turned and shouted through the door. "All right, Sergeant. Bring them in."

The three scowling youths who joined them blinked uncertainly at first, as if there were too much light in the room. Then the tallest of them pointed at Fred and yelled, "That's him! That's the guy!"

"No, no!" Fred's voice was beginning to desert him. "What does he mean? Who put him up to this?"

The shortest of them, but he had the longest hair, rushed at Fred with both hands raised and would

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have struck him down if the sergeant hadn't caught him before he could. "You creep! Planting that junk on us so we would take the rap! You stinking creep! You passed us a buck apiece so we would stay there till some cop could get ideas. Egghead scum!"

Fred did his best to look bewildered, failed, then gave up trying. It was all too clear, he seemed to acknowledge—to him, to everybody. All too clear.

"Well, Mr. Monk?" said the Inspector.

Fred couldn't look at him. He could hardly continue to stand up. He worked at it, wavered, and went down at last.

"Well, Professor?" The Inspector had no mercy at this moment.

"All right," whispered Fred before he fainted completely away.

"Mrs. Eldred, I congratulate you."

The sergeant had removed the boys; and after Fred was revived, two patrolmen had led him out to their squad car whose engine was still running. The three old friends were once again alone in the room.

"Sit down," said Sally to the Inspector. "I can make some coffee."

"No. There still is a lot to do. I have to be getting back."

"Congratulate *me*?"

"Why not? The lead was yours, you know."

"Then John told you what I suspected—only suspected."

"Yes. And I thought I would try —this." He waved to where Fred had fallen.

"And it worked."

"It certainly did."

"Everything happened so fast."

"The way everything ought to, but seldom does."

"Oh, dear!"

"What do you mean by that?" said John.

She sighed. "I wish I knew."

"I wish I knew," said John, "why the man talked so much. He didn't need to talk at all. If he hadn't—"

"They often do," said the Inspector, "but not very often to someone like your wife."

"There is no one like my wife."

"Agreed," said the Inspector, saluting both of them as he took his leave at last.

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We welcome the first appearance in EQMM of John Pierce, a very talented writer, with an unusual story about "the eternal triangle." Mr. Pierce gets under your skin—because he gets under the skin of his characters . . .

THE CHICKEN GAME

by JOHN PIERCE

COSGROVE DATED THE ORIGIN OF the chicken murder plot to a Monday morning in April. They had met, as was their custom—he and Billie Callahan—in the living room of her apartment following the departure for work of her husband Emil, most often referred to as *he* or *him*. Cosgrove's work day did not begin until noon.

"Lately," said Billie, sitting prettily in her red housecoat on the overstuffed sofa, "lately, Georgie, I've been daydreaming the craziest ideas."

"About what?" asked Cosgrove, whose own apartment was but a thin wall away.

"Him."

"What kind of ideas?"

"Like, oh, you know that silly TV commercial, where the knight on a white horse comes galloping down the street touching everyone with his lance and turning their clothes snowy-white. Well, sometimes I get to wishing it was *him* standing downstairs in the morning waiting for his ride to work and the knight would miss his signals and run that lance about ten feet through him, right through the nitty-gritty."

"And you'd toss him a rose from the balcony."

"I might toss him a lot more than that."

Diagrams were not needed. Emil Callahan was worth anywhere from $750,000 on up, all of it misered away in investments, tax dodges, safe-deposit boxes, and lesser cubbyholes. "Whose cigar?" Cosgrove asked.

"What cigar?"

"In the wastebasket here."

"George Cosgrove." Her laughter trilled ceilingward. "Don't tell me you're getting jealous of *him*."

"I just didn't know he smoked cigars." Five weeks of this and he had not even met the man. He accepted instant coffee from her. "As for your daydreams, I don't have a suit of armor or a lance or a horse. Anyway, that kind of talk makes me nervous."

"Why?"

"It always sounds like you're leading up to something I won't like," he said.

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"I don't see why it should. We both *wish* he were dead. I don't see much difference between thinking it and saying it."

Cosgrove said, "You'd find out the difference if he had this place bugged."

Again her high trill of laughter. "A little late to be worrying about *that.*"

Uneasily he agreed. "It still makes me nervous."

"Okay," she sighed, exhaling heavily and dropping her pretty bleached head back, lowering her green-tinted eyelids. "So, hot dog, we go on seeing each other two hours or less every morning five days a week—holidays and vacations excluded—the rest of our awful lives."

"For the twentieth time, you can divorce him."

"And for the fortieth time, I'm too old and too tired to want to live on what you make." Billie was a vibrant 32.

"Well," he said dourly, "I'll swear if I can see where you're living a bit better than I am. He never gives you a dime, he's too cheap to even buy an automobile, you live on stewbones, and you live here in a crummy apartment, just like me."

"Yes, sugar, but I've got patience."

"For what? He's not going to die for thirty years. He's not forty-five yet. He's not much older than I am."

"And you're such an old pessimist. Behold, I see this strange new development. Together with Joe Ormsby, who sells for him and picks him up every morning, he's rediscovered his adolescence. If you could see the two of them together. Wear funny little hats at the conventions. Tell these elephant and old knock-knock jokes. Have two drinks—whenever he can get some purchasing agent to buy them—and start singing *Little Orphan Annie.* It's disgusting. And that 'chicken' scene every morning, that's the world's worst."

"What's that?"

"You've never seen Ormsby pick him up for work 'round eight thirty?"

"You know I'm never up that early."

"Well, do get up and watch them. You'll think you're about twelve years old."

"All well and good," he said, "but what does adolescence have to do with him dying?"

"You watch them tomorrow morning you might see."

Cosgrove lingered a while and then got into his old Volkswagen and drove out to Federated Gaskets, where he worked. He punched the clock at noon, exchanged his jacket for a green work coat, and uncovered his adding machine. He wished Billie wouldn't talk that way. It rattled him, and his work suffered.

He opened a ledger, took yesterday's vouchers from his In basket, and began keying the machine. The

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work, after eleven years, asked for no concentration, and his mind turned itself to the same old replay of the same mildewed dreams—unearned glories, ringing public speeches he had never made, the dead past, the bleak future, unpaid bills, and the cutting remarks devised by his betters, primarily the office manager, Mr. Beam.

He thought of Billie Callahan and her husband Emil. From his nightly pastime of listening to the pasteboard-thin wall between the two apartments, he'd bet he knew more about them than they did. Callahan might well be the stingiest man in the Western World. And the most careful. His first wife he'd got clear of without paying a nickel—producing love-nest evidence not worth her lawyer's fee to dispute.

Emil had married Billie a year ago. They rarely went out, never entertained, never made love. Such dialogue as went on between them consisted of icy pleasantries, her rejections to his overtures, and clangorous two a.m. arguments that shook the brick building to its water mains.

Cosgrove believed she really *did* want him dead. The thought stopped him in mid-calculation. He sat transfixed, his eyes far away, until a throat was cleared near him. Mr. Beam stood atop him, glaring.

Cosgrove punched out at six and at home watched the World Television Premiere of a John Gilbert movie while consuming a burnt TV dinner. He then got into his torn and buttonless pajamas, listened desultorily with an ear to the wall, and went to bed.

He was up early the next morning. He rubbed his thinning hair, watched a roach climb the old hand-crank adding machine on which he did seasonal income tax work, and was sitting by his front window drinking coffee when the downstairs screen door slammed. It was Emil Callahan, who walked the fifteen feet to the near curb to stand reading his morning *Chronicle*. He was a porkish, pink-faced man who, said Billie, wore a hairpiece; he wore cheap baggy suits and rimless glasses.

Mulberry was a narrow, one-way, tree-covered street of aging brick and frame houses, but the scattered work traffic shot by, from right to left, at an almost too lively clip. On the front porch of the gray frame across the way sat old man Gibson in his rocker, beginning his day-long vigil. Mrs. Ratterman watered her plants in the adjoining yard.

For perhaps three minutes Callahan stood motionless on this side of the street reading his paper, oblivious of the cars pounding by, and then this happened: quite abruptly, glancing neither right nor left, the man stepped down onto the asphalt between parked cars and walked, to Cosgrove's horror, *right into the path* of an automobile bearing down at an obliterative speed!

Callahan did not waver; he

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strolled right on in total abstraction, never looking up from his newspaper. Cosgrove had opened his mouth to shout when the car, at the very last moment, braked to a stop, missing Callahan by a foot.

Then Cosgrove heard the braying laughter of the two of them—the unseen driver and Callahan as he got into the right-front door. They drove away. The automobile was a 1964 gray Python sedan.

Across the street sat old Gibson, unperturbed; Mrs. Ratterman watered her plants. Cosgrove, his palms clammy, stood up at the rapping on his wall. It was Billie: three raps, widely spaced, which meant "Come on over." He rapped acknowledgement, went down his back stairs and out onto the back porch, into the next door and up again.

"What *is* all that?" he asked her, accepting coffee.

"It's kind of an adult game of chicken, like kids play, I think. Or like the toreador teasing the bull. Will Emil Callahan jump? Will Joe Ormsby chicken out? It goes on every day when they're feeling boyish."

Cosgrove reflected. "I knew a fellow whose girl used to do that to him in her daddy's car. One day her foot slipped on the brake pedal and she put him right through a drugstore wall."

"Yes, George, the thought's occurred to me," she said patiently. "About three hundred times I've thought, what if Ormsby's foot slipped, or his brakes suddenly failed, or if he just happened to have a nice heart attack at the crucial moment."

Cosgrove drove the Volks to work and uncovered his adding machine. Four long tapes of yesterday's work had been returned to him for corrections. Wearily he started through them. He saw little likelihood of the things Billie imagined either happening to Joe Ormsby or being arranged. Arranged. That the word had even slipped into his mind gave him heartburn. She had him thinking that way too. And she kept mentioning that $750,000. A year's *interest* at, say, 5% on that kind of money came to more than he made in four years.

At six o'clock he punched out and cruised out the Reservoir Road to pick up some of the income tax work on which he made a little extra every year. Each January he left cards around town. He did not want to think of the Callahans. To escape, he took in a Western movie, isolating himself with his bag of popcorn in the front portion of the theater. In the movie a herd of cattle was nefariously stampeded, stomping to death a benevolent old sheep rancher. In the end the hero, weary of saloon entrances and midtown shootouts, married the sheepman's daughter and acquired the ranch and a million head of sheep.

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He was up early again the next morning, this time with his watch on the window sill before him. Out came old Gibson on his cane and sat down in his rocker. Out came Mrs. Ratterman with the garden hose. At 8:30 sharp came the clump of Callahan's footsteps on the front next-door stairway. He emerged. He stood reading his *Chronicle* at the same spot on the curbing on this side of the street.

Cosgrove watched intently. At exactly 8:33, again for no perceptible reason and without even a turn of his head, Callahan stepped out onto the asphalt between the parked cars, squarely into the path of the oncoming gray Python sedan. This time the front bumper missed him by no more than six inches, and laughter resounded as they rode away. From this altitude Cosgrove could see no more of Ormsby than his left elbow. The legal speed limit was 35, but most traffic exceeded it.

He went down and up the back way to Billie's. Preoccupied, he freed himself from her embrace and went to her window. "Why does he wait on this side of the street since he's got to get in on the other side of the car?"

"Because he likes to read his paper while waiting, and the sun's right in your eyes on the other side of the street."

So it was. "But he never even looks up. He seems to know instinctively just when that particular car's coming."

"Sugar, he's been getting in that same car at eight thirty-something every work day for so long he knows it from the farthest corner of his eye—the grillwork, the color, the inspection stamp on the windshield, and the bent license plate. He knows it like he knows where every cent of his money goes. And I think it's part of the game, too—to act like he doesn't see Ormsby."

"Most unusual," Cosgrove said.

"But not quite unusual enough. If someone, now, some morning, should come piledriving along in an identical car at around eight thirty-three and he'd step out in front of *it* reading his paper, *that* would be unusual."

"It would have to be identical," Cosgrove said.

Saying that was falling right in with her machinations, going along. He did not like it. He wanted no part. Shaken, furious at himself, he plunged into his work at Federated Gaskets and that night brought home a sheaf of tax returns. He avoided her the following morning, ignoring her raps on the wall and the telephone, even though drawn irresistibly to the charade outside the window, which went off with not the slightest variation. He estimated Ormsby's speed, noted at precisely which spot the brakes were applied.

At the office he found masses of yesterday's work returned for corrections, together with a sharp ultimatum from Mr. Beam. She was

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fouling up his life, endangering his job, and he clenched his teeth as though to crush out all thoughts of the chicken game and the dread vistas it spawned.

He was in the company cafeteria during the four o'clock coffee break when he overheard what sparked the thought that made a shambles of the rest of the work afternoon. It followed him home, this thought, and it riddled his sleep. Let him doze off and there it came again, like a fly that would not go away. To get rid of a fly, you swatted it. How shoo away $750,000? Ironically, it wasn't the thought itself that was important. What was important was that he had halfway made up his mind.

Dawn came, then street sounds and the thump of thrown newspapers, and he dragged himself to the window, his watch in hand, to make meticulous note of that scene. Time, 8:33½, and today there was an innovation. Today Callahan danced clear and Ormsby sped on by as if to leave him standing there. But he backed up, amid raucous laughter. Cosgrove noticed the bent license plate and the inspection stamp on the lower-right windshield, as described by Billie, and saw that the left-front bumper guard was a little bit askew.

Unshaven, red-eyed, he joined Billie, was chided for ignoring her yesterday, and twice dozed off while she made coffee. He had prayed he could keep from telling her, but he hadn't the will. He said, "This fellow Hadley at the office, he said during coffee break yesterday he was thinking of trading in his old car on a new one."

"I don't believe I know Mr. Hadley."

"No, but his old car's a three-year-old '64 Python sedan."

She kissed him glutinously and squeezed him. "I was wondering when you were going to think of that," she said.

"Whose gold tie clip?" asked Cosgrove.

"What gold tie clip? Where?"

"Down here, between these cushions."

"Well, now, whose do you think it is?"

"I just didn't figure him buying anything made out of gold."

"So he got it for Christmas from his first wife." Her arms around him, she bit his ear. "You *are* going to buy the car."

"It's no good," he said. "Ormsby's car is gray. This one of Hadley's is a light green."

"And they don't have paint shops any more?"

"Not for this kind of job. That gray paint's old and cloudy. Not a bit of gloss left on it. No way you could possibly paint it to look exactly like Ormsby's, and as sensitive as your husband is—"

"That's not what I've heard," Billie said. "I read somewhere that the car people put out special kits to match exactly the color, old or new,

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of any of their recent cars. How else do you think they repaint a damaged fender to make it match four or five-year-old paint?"

"Yes, but that's just to touch up. Who goes out and buys a used car and then has it repainted to look as if it's still three years old?"

"I see what you mean," she said. There was silence and some quiet nuzzling and she sighed. "Though it does seem to me that somewhere in a city this size there must be at least two dozen other gray 1964 Pythons around."

Too obvious, just too obvious, thought Cosgrove, wheeling the Volks through town. To go out and suddenly buy the particular three-year-old car that matched Ormsby's, to come fogging down Mulberry at that particular time, to expunge Emil Callahan, and then, after a decorous interval, to disappear with his wife? He fancied himself at least a shade smarter than that. Agreed that Gibson and Mrs. Ratterman, who'd witnessed the sequence countless times, would testify to the daily horseplay and that Callahan had mistaken his gray Pythons. Agreed, it would go down as a jaywalking accident. But let somebody get really curious and start prying—

What kind of starchy customer might this Ormsby be? Cosgrove had never seen his face. For all this, all the negatives, he found his eyes drawn to each gray automobile he passed as he drove, searching for the precise combination of year, color, body style, and make. He parked and punched the clock, donned his work coat, and went to his desk. Almost every computation he'd run off yesterday was back again; happily Beam was home with a cold.

Cosgrove addressed the machine; his fingers were trembling. It was insanity, the whole thing. He had, for example, always taken pains to use the back door to visit Billie, but wouldn't old Gibson, who watched everything, have seen something? Had Gibson caught a glimpse of him in her front window? And how often did one run one's next-door neighbor down right in front of the house? One would have to have been coming from somewhere else up the street—a drug store, a filling station, a barber shop. Insanity all the way.

He could not concentrate, could not perform the most basic calculation, and at 4:30 he pleaded a toothache and left the office. He found himself driving aimlessly about. Or not so aimlessly at that. Always he seemed lured to the streets where used cars stacked the lots. Following gray sedans, he ignored stop signs and lights and got two traffic tickets before dusk.

At home he drank three cans of beer, ate a frankfurter, and drove out the highway to a double-feature drive-in movie. Just in front of him was a gray '64 Python, but the body style was not right. In the first mov-

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ie a U.S. Lieutenant ran his Sherman tank over an S.S. General, captured a scenic village and moved into a castle owned by Ingrid Bergman, an anti-Nazi Austrian countess. He slept very little. It was Friday. He was at the window at 8:30 and before nine he knocked at Billie's back door.

"I counted six of them," he said. "Two parked on the street, three driving, and one in Mad Dog Dugan's Used Car."

"So there we are," she said gaily.

"It's still no good," he lamented. "I can't just go in and buy the thing and then rush home and run him down."

"Well, Georgie, you've got a long time ahead of you if you think some stranger's just going to walk up to you on the street and offer to *sell* you one."

"It's got to be done more naturally. I'll have to meet someone who owns one, strike up a casual friendship, and drop a few beefs about my Volks and how afraid I am of car lots and then kind of bring it up."

"And how long does all this take?"

"I don't know."

Billie chewed her lower lip, disenchanted. "Why don't we just forget the whole thing, George? It is kind of fantastic, when you come to think about it, and I doubt if it's going to hold together very long. They'll get bored with it, or Ormsby'll show up in a new car some morning, or we'll up and move somewhere to another apartment."

"*Are* you?" Cosgrove asked, alarmed.

"It's possible. He keeps talking about moving. He's been paying Ormsby $1.25 a week for the transportation to work and it burns him up that Ormsby takes it. He talks about moving somewhere near the office where he can walk to work and drop home for a break now and then." She kissed his cheek and patted his head. "Don't look so gloomy. We'd still be able to see each other. Now and then. If I . . ."—stretching voluptuously—"if I . . . don't meet someone else."

Despondent, he drove to work. Just exactly what did he want in his beer? What was his life? Eleven years bent over this same damn adding machine, cost-accounting eleven billion pieces of cork. Prior to that, for eight years, it was valves and fittings. And what would he be doing twenty years from now?—as if he didn't know.

Here, a thin wall away, was the girl, early retirement to a Caribbean isle, and the way to achieve them, and here was he, sniffing and stalling and pussyfooting around like a Pekingese dog in a lumber camp. And if Billie *should* move away? Billie was vain, she was silly, she was half bright, but he could not imagine life without her.

He answered his ringing phone to a woman's voice that was sultry but troubled. She had come across

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one of his business cards. She was "rather desperately" in tax trouble and wondered if he might drop in Saturday evening. He took her name and address and agreed to meet her at six on Saturday, tomorrow. How had she got his office phone? He stared at the dirty window, which overlooked, in the distance, a smoking garbage dump. When had they last washed that window?

Billie. She was right, of course: nobody was going to *give* him the car. From the office he went to a finance company and, cash in hand, drove to the Mad Dog Dugan car lot. The gray Python was gone. They had sold it that afternoon.

At home he sat down with the Yellow Pages and drew up on his city map an itinerary covering every car lot in town and in the suburbs. During Saturday he visited 21 of them. None had the exact car he wanted. Sick, worn, dispirited, he had a hamburger at a drive-in and then drove south to the edge of town to keep the tax appointment he had made. The house, on a street off the freeway, was old stucco, with weeds in the yard. But on that cracked cement driveway was a three-year-old 1964 gray Python sedan. The right rear fender was damaged, but in all the essential ways it was a duplicate of the car Ormsby drove.

She was a youngish brunette, handsome, willowy, and all nerves. An interior decorator, she was worried over certain misstatements she'd made in her tax returns of the past two years, and now dreaded new expenses she wasn't going to be able to meet. The return was not a complex one, but for Cosgrove, his mind on Billie and the gray Python outside, the simplest arithmetic was a mountain climb.

"I'm afraid, Madam," he announced eventually, "that you're going to owe them a little over $1,600."

His answer was a loud crash. He whirled around. The woman had hit the floor in a faint, taking a lamp table with her. Cosgrove ran to the kitchen, found bourbon and a dishcloth, which he wet, and came back to kneel beside her, damping her forehead, offering her liquor in a glass.

"Just . . . so tired of it," she murmured.

Cosgrove lifted her to the couch. "Madam, if it would help you in any way—are you interested in selling your car?"

Less Volkswagen, less checking account and most of the $1,000 he had borrowed, he drove the gray Python away. It was robbery; the car was a rattletrap, but it was heavy and had authority and bore the required inspection stamp. There was an isolated roadway he knew of, the approach to a broken bridge. There he parked and leafed through his driver's manual.

To stop a car going 40 miles an hour, 149 feet were required. Did

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Callahan give him that much? Irrelevant; he did not plan to stop. All that was needed was the semblance of an honest braking effort for his audience—Gibson and Mrs. Ratterman—without taking too much off the speed.

He marked a line on the pavement, paced forward and marked again, then backed the Python the equivalent of a block, and gunned the car forward, finally hitting the brakes. He backed, increased the speed forward, braked again. Not until dusk was he satisfied. He bent the front license plate to resemble Ormsby's and loosened the front left bumper guard and, back in his neighborhood, drove up Mulberry Street in the proper direction, charting potholes and feeder streets, selecting a spot a block and a half short of the target area from which he could both watch for Ormsby and make an uninterrupted approach.

It was after ten o'clock when he left the car in a garage and walked home. Using a few drinks and a tranquilizer, he slept until the telephone woke him at noon. It was Billie. *He* had gone to the office this Sunday with tax problems of his own. Cosgrove declined her invitation, but told her he had found the car. She went quite out of control.

"Oh, George," she sobbed, "oh, George darling—"

It tore his heart out to hear her cry. "There, there," he soothed.

"I mean," she sobbed, "I'd just about given up on it and resigned myself to the rest of my life with him. It's Ormsby. He's been offered a better job at another company and tomorrow's probably going to be his last day to pick him up."

"Tomorrow it is then," said Cosgrove.

He assured her that he'd be in no danger, hung the phone up, and gave twenty hours to reassuring himself, achieving, by morning, a fugue state wherein a second self governed by a third guided him from a fourth stratosphere, all his acts subject to a directorship no more answerable to the moralities than a balloon.

At 8:00 he got the car from the garage, stopped for a quick coffee in a drug store five blocks north, drove south on Mulberry, parked at the preselected spot, looked at his watch, and went forward. Two indelible memories of Callahan were presented him: one, waggishly disdainful, porkish and erect in midstreet, wrists shaking the paper like a toreador's cape, daring him; and two, spreadeagled in the air, upside down, flying forever away.

Chicken, said a voice from the fourth level, whereupon Cosgrove pushed the door open, stepped onto the roadway, discovered he had no bones left in his knees, and met the uprushing asphalt head-on . . .

All that afternoon and into midnight the callers rang at Billie Callahan's door. Through the wall he

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heard their footsteps, their voices as they offered condolences. It was wiser that he did not call her yet; when he did, in mid-morning of the next day, he got no answer.

He reread in yesterday evening's *Courier* the account of Emil Callahan's fatal jaywalking accident. Mrs. Ratterman, Mr. Gibson, Joseph Ormsby—who seemed to have driven up behind him—and a strolling passerby had all made statements in Cosgrove's behalf. It did not convince him. He still lived with the shock and shudder of the impact against Callahan's body, and in the bathroom mirror he could not get the feel of himself.

Answering a telephone summons, he taxied to police headquarters to sign a typewritten statement, and walked to the Green Acres Funeral Home. There, in an anteroom choked with flowers, a stocky blond man stood at the splendid casket, his arm around a veiled woman in black. Gently he maneuvered her to the small table bearing the Golden Memory Book; both signed their names and, departing, fixed Cosgrove with accusative eyes.

Left alone, Cosgrove passed perfunctorily by the slumbering Callahan, glanced at the open Memory Book, frowned, and signed. Outside he again saw the mourning couple, arms about each other, going into a cocktail lounge. Hadn't he seen her before? He bought a morning *Chronicle* and read a new obituary in a taxi going home.

It wasn't so much Billie's lack of enthusiasm that annoyed him as the kittenishness with which she turned her face from his kiss, spun away, and floated off to resettle herself on the overstuffed sofa. She wore a blue silk dressing gown. A vase of red roses was at her head. Prettily she stretched herself, blinked, smiled at a thought far away, and then registered certain irritation.

"I was expecting someone else," she said.

At the back door? "Who?" asked Cosgrove.

"Joe Ormsby, of course."

Cosgrove sat down and studied his fingers. "Why Joe Ormsby?"

She smiled at the ceiling. She stretched her arms. "Just because."

"Are you trying to tell me something?" he asked her.

"Oh, George, don't be ridiculous. You didn't really think I was serious about you."

"Ormsby? You mean, *Ormsby?*"

"You did everything just like Joe and I planned it, George. He figured it out—that chicken game—long ago. He said, why not use you? He'll be making $25,000 on his new job and we're going to get married. If you'd ever seen him you'd understand."

"You mean—*Orms—?*"

"George, *please* don't be tiresome. I'm a fragile thing and I've waited for happiness for so long." She threw him a glance that was at once a smile, a pout, a reprimand. "We really would have given you

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some of the money if it had worked."

"Worked?" Cosgrove froze.

"You didn't read this morning's paper?"

"I read in yesterday's where it named you as his widow. In today's *Chronicle* it names a Lutetia Givens Callahan as the wife."

"Yes, doesn't it just sicken you? That sneaky little bitch. All this time she's known the divorce wasn't any good—something about the Nevada residence requirements he didn't take care of properly—and there she was, just sitting and watching us, playing it cool. All this, all this misery and penny pinching, and I wasn't even legally married to that fat creep."

"You mean—there's *no money?*"

"She gets the money, once the government gets finished with it, I get Joe Ormsby, and you get the satisfaction of a job well done."

The ringing in his ears threatened his vision. "I got fired from my job," he thought he heard himself say.

"Please don't be tiresome, George. It's been fun, but Ormsby's coming, and I wish you'd leave."

He looked at his fingers. He stood up. He was at the doorway when she called to him, "There, George," and threw a rose at his feet. He left it there and started woodenly down the stairway, hearing her high trill of laughter.

If she was serious about waiting for Ormsby, she'd better hang onto those roses; she might have to eat them for supper within a few days. She'd been wrong about one thing: he had seen Ormsby once—signing the book at the Green Acres Funeral Home. The veiled woman in his warm custody was the same Lutetia Givens (Callahan) who had sold Cosgrove the car.

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The third Gumshoe Glossary—more mangled meanings from Lamprey's Lexicon. For example:

Embezzle: *In France, the first name given to a famous actor noted for his portrayal of Sherlock Holmes. His full name, naturally, comes out M. Bezzle Rathbone.*

The Gumshoe Glossary should be much more popular with fans and aficionados than apparently it has been. Some of the daffy definitions are delicious, and surely if Schlock Homes consulted a Defective Dictionary—a codebook for his secret and private eye—it would undoubtedly be the Gumshoe Glossary, that distorted duodecimo or, depending on its size (which, although a puzzling question, is not beyond all *conjecture), that fallacious folio . . .*

GUMSHOE GLOSSARY: III

by A. C. LAMPREY

Addiction: A step in mathematics. The opposite of subtraction, which is the setting of the lower bones; and not to be confused with subdivision, which is the dismantling of underwater craft and obviously requires considerable underwater craft.

Alibi: A Persian famous for his robber band of Forty Thieves. The story has it that they used to hide in jugs, which is where most robber bands end up, doing a stretch.

Bête Noire: In the game of roulette, a wager on the black.

Bamboozle: An alcoholic drink made, obviously, from fermented bamboo, which is a plant that grows quite high in the tropics. People partaking of this drink often do the same.

Call One's Bluff: The prerogative of naming a mountain after yourself once you have discovered it. However, it is suggested that one provide himself with spiked shoes and rope if one is going to do much mountain-claiming.

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Charlatan: A dance craze popular in the Twenties.

Charnel House: A famous edifice built in 1867 on the English Charnel by one James English, for whom this body of water was named. Because all visitors to the house drank the health of its owner, he became the most toasted English of all time.

Deadly Weapon: There is a profound tragedy connected with this innocent phrase. In 1867 an unknown Indian tribe elected one Dudley Wampum as their tribal chief, but unfortunately the smoke signals announcing the happy event were garbled because of a leaky blanket. As a result, the Tenth U.S. Cavalry, who were smoke-tapping, misread the signals and attacked. Of course they won, but having no use for their captives, they hocked them. This tribe has been known, ever since, as the Pawnees.

Debase: The result of a good pick-off play at second.

Drug Addict: The top story of a pharmacy. As all readers know, top stories are becoming quite rare, but then, so are pharmacies. This is because more and more of our young people are leaving the pharmacies to live in the citicies.

Exit Wound: The battle scars suffered in leaving a crowded subway train.

Flat Denial: Refusal to rent an apartment to a prospective tenant, often caused by the landlord's fear that the tenant might be careless in the use of the incinerator to dispose of his refusal.

Gas Chamber: Any legislative body in session. A legislative body is approximately the same as a Legal Corps.

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Hijack: A mechanical device for elevating tall automobiles. A car which has been raised by this means is known, in certain sections of London, as a Hupmobile.

Hellion: A gas which is lighter than air and therefore used for lifting balloons. Lifting balloons is against the law.

Incorrigible: A famous fortress in the Philippines.

Juvenile Delinquency: A reference to the failure to pay taxes of Juvenile, a satirical Roman poet of approximately 60 A.D.

Knowing Leer: A Shakespearean actor who is familiar with his lines.

Languish in Gaol: As all students know—or should know—all Gaol is divided into three parts, and when Caesar conquered the territory, he found the multiplicity of tongues and dialects confusing, so he passed an edict making Latin the official languish in Gaol.

Luger: A type of sailboat made famous by the expression, "Once aboard the luger and the gal is mine." For anyone who might be interested, a gal is the equivalent of eight pts., or the same as two field goals and a safety.

Macabre: A character from Dickens' David Copperfield.

Nicotine: Meaning at the last moment, as in the phrase, "She was saved in the nicotine." We make no claim that she deserved being saved; we merely define these terms, rather than comment on their morals, which are wall paintings usually done in tempera by ill-natured painters.

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Order in the Court: Well, let me see . . . First, of course, comes the King and then the Queen, and then the Princes and/or Princesses, and then the Chancellors—but the chancellors are that you know all this.

Private Eye: A reference to Thomas J. Eye who joined the Army at the very lowest rank but who, through hard work and great effort, managed to rise to a two-stripe grade. Unfortunately, shortly after this promotion he succumbed to a bad siege of Troy which was going about at the time, and he is therefore no longer Corporeal.

Q.E.D.: The initials of the Latin phrase, *Quod Erat Demonstrandum,* which means: "We are showing you our jail."

Rife: In Japan, a weekly news magazine noted for its pictorial presentation of events.

Summons: A word taken from context from an old popular song, which went: "Summons in the kitchen with Dinah." However, under the normal rules of the local Health Department, no unauthorized visitors are allowed in the kitchen unless, of course, they are members of Dinah's Club.

Slander: Not fetish.

Threat: A thin line or cord used for sewing in the garment trades. Garment trades are quite common in Sorority Houses, and come under the jurisdiction of ILGWU, which is an Eskimo hut.

Underhanded: A method of pitching baseball, popular with women's nines. The underhanded part, of course, is that most women's nines are actually elevens, which would make them football teams.

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Violence: Part of the string section of an orchestra. Violence are slightly smaller than Cellos, which come in six delicious flavors.

Wages of Sin: There is some confusion regarding this phrase, since it has never been clearly defined whether they are talking about Lee Hop Sin, who earned six dollars a month as a houseboy on the old Erie Canal, or Chang Wong Sin, who earned much more. In any event, the wages of Sin were Low, who was his brother-in-law.

Witchcraft: A reasonable question when attempting to determine the proper wrapping paper to be used. There are some who claim the only paper to be used is Tissue. The answer to this, of course, is Gesundheit.

X: A member of the law firm of X and Paynes, which specializes in damage suits resulting from accidents.

X-terminate: Terminates are little insects that eat wood, and once you get them out of the house, the house of course is x-terminated.

Yen: A great desire for Japanese currency, which is a stream of warm water that sweeps the Asia coast. It is quite similar to the Gulf Stream except that it runs all the time, while Gulf Stream only runs in the winter.

Zounds!: The loud noises heard in a German Hof-Brau. People there are occasionally Brau-beaten, which of course puts them in a Hof.

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A couple of small-timers in the numbers racket had hit on a new angle, and if the big-timers in the syndicate took over . . .

MORE THAN ONE WAY TO SKIN A CAT

by ED LACY

JAKE MCCARTY, OUR PRECINCT CAPtain, might be called the last of the old-fashioned Irish cops. In fact, he's almost a caricature of the type as seen in too many bad movies: florid face with a beer nose veined like a road map; wild, thick, gray hair; burly body including the standard, overlapping potbelly in a sloppy uniform. I knew Jake couldn't understand my problem, but since he was running the precinct I had to go through channels, which meant through him.

As usual he waved a lumpy hand at me and asked, "How's the Detective Squad, Ralph?"—as if we were a couple of shopkeepers discussing sales.

"Things were working smoothly up to a week ago, sir," I said, sitting opposite him at his cluttered desk. "Now there's a small-time numbers setup operating on Hamilton Place that's got me a little worried."

He showed his dentures in a Cheshire grin. "What's your problem, boy? Have they found a new way of hiding policy slips?"

"I'm afraid it's worse than that, sir. These guys don't *need* to write anything down—they're using a walkie-talkie."

"Well now, how about that?" Jake's potato face looked almost childlike. "How do they work it?"

"Well, sir, I imagine we gave them the idea—they probably saw our Tactical Police using walkie-talkies. And it's all so damn simple I'm afraid other numbers guys may latch on to it and then we'll really have a problem, a big fat problem. Frenchy Dillon, a two-bit punk, is the runner and sidewalk man. Howard Smith, another petty goon, is the inside man and banker. Frenchy has his set in his shirt pocket and when somebody plays a number, Frenchy simply says, 'Mrs. Lusk, 25¢ on 105, straight.'

"Smith hears this on his receiver, sitting up in some apartment, and writes it down. If we pick up Frenchy, he hasn't any written evidence on him—nothing that would stand up in court. Sure, he has a walkie-talkie, but you can buy them for less than $20 and it's no crime to carry one. As for Smith, we'd need a court order to break into his apartment and by the time we'd batter down his door, he'd have

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flushed his slips down the toilet—and again we'd have no evidence."

"Well, well, electronic gambling! What will these punks think up next?" Jake said, grinning again.

"Perhaps you don't see the danger, sir. At the moment it's only a small operation—Frenchy covers a block of apartment buildings and their take is just a few hundred bucks a day. Knowing Smith, his bankroll can't be much over a grand. What worries me is this: if they get bigger, the syndicate will muscle in, and if the syndicate picks up the walkie-talkie idea, we'll really be up the creek. I don't have to tell you that syndicate numbers money goes into dope and most of the other major crimes."

"Yeah, you don't have to tell me, Ralph."

"Our problem is how to step on Frenchy and Smith but quick."

Captain McCarty nodded, still grinning. "No problem, Ralph. Talk to the Police Lab."

"I've already done that, sir," I said patiently. "They told me a walkie-talkie operates on a certain short wavelength. We could use a scrambler, a gadget generating a radio frequency noise, which would spoil the reception on the receiving end of the walkie-talkie. The trouble with that is, it will also jam *all* radio and TV reception in the area, and start a large stink. The lab men said they can easily find the wavelength the walkie-talkie is using, but as I've said, busting down a door would give Smith time to destroy his records."

Jake rubbed his heavy chin. "How long's this been going on?"

"Four or five days. Naturally, Frenchy and Smith are ducking the syndicate, but it's only a matter of time before the big boys hear about it and take over, including the walkie-talkie gimmick."

Jake yawned. "Okay, Ralph, I'll have a chat with the lab myself."

"But I've already discussed this with them and they—"

Jake winked. "Ralph, let me give you an old police rule: there's always more than one way to skin a cat. I'll handle this."

"Very good, sir," I said, knowing it was hopeless. I hardly understood anything about electronics and I'm a college man. I doubt if Jake ever finished high school. Still, I really didn't know what I had expected Jake to do—maybe have headquarters consult Federal communications and see if it was legal to broadcast without a license. Or something like that.

It was Wednesday afternoon when I talked to Captain McCarty. Early Saturday morning Frenchy Dillon was found in a back alley, badly beaten. While Frenchy wouldn't talk, the grapevine said that Smith had left town in a rush, his nose broken and his eyes puffed.

I dropped into Jake's office. "Seems we got a break, Captain. Frenchy and Smith had a fight and Smith beat Frenchy up. I've already

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put it on the teletype and notified out-of-city police departments to pick up Smith for assault. We sure were lucky they had this falling out—it will end their walkie-talkie set-up."

"Ralph, the best luck is the kind you make yourself," Jake said, taking a police walkie-talkie from his desk drawer. "I had me a talk with our lab electronics experts. They fixed up this walkie-talkie to operate on the same wavelength Frenchy and Smith were using."

I tried not to look puzzled. "Sir, are you telling me you had something to do with their fight?"

"Ralph, I told you, there's more than one way to skin a cat. Last Thursday and Friday I spent a few minutes every hour, between ten a.m. and two p.m., driving through Hamilton Place with this here walkie-talkie. You know, this is the first time I ever used one. Wonderful gadget."

"Sir, you've lost me."

"Come on, Ralph, you're one of my best detectives, so you ought to see what a pushover this was. On these walkie-talkies you can't recognize a voice, so I'd just say, 'Mr. Burns, $2 on 638, straight.' Or, 'Jim Parker, $2 on 169, 50¢ straight, the rest combinated.' It was a cinch."

"I'm afraid I still don't understand, Captain."

Jake flashed his store-teeth grin. "Ralph, I know punks. All I did was call in about $25 worth of numbers during Thursday, maybe another $25 worth on Friday. Meaning, Frenchy was short that much each day when he handed in his dough. Naturally, Smith assumed Frenchy was holding out on him and they were soon swinging on each other, as I expected. We'll collar Smith for assault and should be able to pin the same rap on Frenchy, when he leaves the hospital."

Jake patted the walkie-talkie. "Science is great, Ralph, almost as great as old-fashioned common sense."

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OF TIME AND MURDER

by HELEN McCLOY

(*continued from page 42*)

Vanburgh nodded slowly. "By heaven, you *could* be Bly at thirty-two, though the gray hair is confusing."

Tessie said, "I was so sure you were dead. Otherwise I would have known you."

Bly addressed Denise. "How did you guess? Or have you known all along?"

She was still smiling, enjoying her little triumph. "I suppose it was because I met you by chance on the train, without being told beforehand who you were supposed to be. The others met you only after a rather elaborate build-up about an entirely different personality—Stephen Longworth. Believing is seeing. They believed you were Longworth, so they didn't see you as Bly. And of course the physical change is great.

"On the train you looked vaguely, confusingly familiar to me. As we talked I tried to visualize your face without gray hair at the temples, but I couldn't. Then you, yourself, gave me the association I needed. You dropped a sly hint that Frank Bly was still alive, and fifteen years dropped away from you. That's why I was so startled then. Until that moment I had honestly believed Frank Bly was dead."

"So you planned this dinner tonight to make sure?" suggested Bly.

"With Tessie's help, yes. I told her about our talk on the train, but I didn't mention my suspicion that you were Bly to her or to anyone else. Not even to my husband."

"I had no idea you were capable of such reticence." Strawn echoed her own words, with a smile.

Denise went on, "I soon discovered you were known as Stephen Longworth in Yarborough. That puzzled me. Isn't it illegal to pass under a false name?"

Bly shook his head. "Not a false name A pen name. Stephen Longworth signs publishers' contracts and endorses their royalty checks. He is a real person. Perhaps more real than Frank Bly."

Strawn's ugly, intelligent face had settled into a stolid mold. "Longworth—or Bly—would it be indelicate to ask you if you did take that money?"

"Most indelicate. You say yourself it was returned."

"By you?"

"I haven't admitted that I took it. Why should I return it if I hadn't?"

"Then"—Strawn's voice rang out with sudden vehemence—"just why have you come back?"

Slowly Bly looked from one tense

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face to another "You really want to know? Most probably it's because one of you four nice people tried to murder me fifteen years ago, and I want to find out which one of you it was."

Strawn said, "Preposterous! You're accusing *us*?"

Vanbrugh said, "Really, Bly. How could someone attack you without your seeing who it was?"

"I was struck from behind, in the dark. Next thing I knew I was in the water. I couldn't see above the pier. When I got into midstream it was too dark to see anyone on the pier. Whoever it was tried to beat me back when I tried to climb out. My fingers were smashed. There are the scars."

He held out his right hand. "That was why I ran away. I barely escaped with my life and I was afraid to go back. You were hostile. You had charged me with theft. How could I expect to make a countercharge of attempted murder stick without evidence, without money to pay a lawyer?"

"But, Frank"—Vanbrugh was trying to sound reasonable—"even if you were attacked, why are you so sure it was one of us?"

"Who else could it have been? Who else used that path through the woods?"

They had no answer to this.

Bly went on in a level, dispassionate tone. "Now I have come back, I find that someone else actually was killed in that same place, about that same time. A man who was my height and weight, dressed like me. I don't know who he was. I don't know if he was killed because he was mistaken for me. Or if I was attacked because I was mistaken for him. Or whether someone had a motive for killing both of us, even though we were strangers to each other. I don't know if you made an honest mistake when you identified his body as mine, or if his identity was so incriminating to one of you that it had to be concealed at all costs.

"It's even possible that one of you deliberately drove me away with an accusation of theft and an attempt at violence so that his body could be buried later under my name. But one of you must know the answers to all these questions. Because nothing you've said explains why one of you tried to murder me. And that I intend to find out."

Bly walked out of the room. No one spoke in the living room. He let himself out the front door and walked down the drive.

At the sound of a car he looked back. The Strawns were going home. Vanbrugh stood in the lighted doorway, watching.

Bly left the drive and started down the path through the woods to the boathouse.

The path looked as if it had not been used for years. Branches interlaced overhead, shutting out the stars. He felt his way through dead

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leaves that rustled at every step. After a while he heard the rustling of feet in the leaves behind him.

Again? He smiled tightly, waited, breathless. There was no further sound. Nerves? Memories?

He went on and turned a corner. The boathouse should have blocked his view, but there was the river, placid and silvery in the starlight. All that remained of the boathouse was a pile of charred timber. The pier still extended over the water, but several planks had rotted away.

A twig snapped. He spun around on his heel. Nan stood on the path, a wraith in shimmering white. "Frank! I'm so glad you're alive!"

She ran forward, soundless on pine needles. So that was why he had heard footfalls only on the upper part of the path tonight and that other night, fifteen years ago.

"Do you remember saying you were going to marry me when you grew up?"

Her laugh wavered. "Children are silly!"

"It wasn't silly. It was charming. You're the only one who has bothered to say you're glad I'm alive. Thank you, Nan."

She was standing close, eyes wide and bright. He bent his head and kissed her gently. For a moment her lips responded, warm and firm. Then she drew back, with a little catch in her breath. "You—you were in love with Mother long ago, weren't you?"

"Was I?" He shook his head doubtfully. "A lonely boy's daydream, Nan. I never told your mother or anyone else." His gaze shifted to the burned boathouse. "When did that happen?"

"A few days afterward. They said it was a short circuit." Again her eyes slid away from his. "I must go back. It's late."

"I'll go with you."

"No, please. I'd rather go alone."

Bly walked along the riverbank to his own home. The house was dark, but on the terrace one of the French doors was standing open. He stopped just outside.

Only the faintest light reached the room from the sky outside. It passed over a dark cloak, it edged a feathery crest of pale hair and lay gently along a clean jaw line.

He whispered, "Tessie."

She turned with fluid grace. "Why are you waiting outside?"

"I saw someone in the room. I didn't know who it was at first."

He pressed a switch. The lamp cast a softly shaded radiance, but now he could see the worn, hollow face. The cloak was not really dark. It was violet velvet held at her throat by an amethyst clasp. Even her smile was old, tired, wise, resigned. She said, "I can't believe this. I must look at you."

"I've changed."

"So have I. You know why I'm here?"

"No." To be alone with Tessie, to have her seek him out, ask his help, once his idea of pure heaven.

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And now, who said the middle years of life are always a parody of the youthful dreams? Arabs had a bitter proverb: "Beware the curse of an answered prayer."

"You must know you once had the power to enchant me," he said. "Perhaps you thought you could use that power once more."

She rose. The cloak fell from her shoulders, lying in crushed folds about her feet, so flowery a color that he almost expected it to give off the fragrance of crushed violets. "That wasn't kind. You are mocking me." The smoky dress swirled about her ankles as she moved to face the wide unframed mirror over the mantelpiece. "Look in the mirror! Could that old woman ever charm any man again?"

"Mrs. Vanbrugh—"

"You called me Tessie a moment ago."

"You haven't really changed. Your spirit is the same."

"Valiantly spoken, Frank, and falsely."

"Tessie." The name slipped out again. "You have one thing on your side when you talk to me—memory. You and Geoffrey Vanbrugh were good to me when I had no other friends. In a way I loved you both. That may be why I became so bitter afterward when I was sure one of you had tried to kill me."

She leaned toward him impulsively. "But you were not killed. And now you're a success. What have you to gain by raking over the cinders of an old crime?"

"Perhaps I hope I can prove that I was mistaken that you and Vanbrugh and the Strawns really are the kindly, pleasant, normal people you seem to be. Now we're alone, why don't you tell me what really happened and why? I might be satisfied with that."

"Oh, Frank!" It was a cry of anguish. "Can't you guess why I came here tonight? To ask you to go away and—forget. If you don't you'll hurt someone I love."

"Nan?"

"Of course not. She was a child then. I mean Geoff."

Bly weighed his next words. "I can't see how anything I do now can hurt Vanbrugh—unless he is the murderer."

Her voice dropped, softly as a dead leaf falls, so light the air can almost support it. "That's it, Frank. He is."

"Vanbrugh? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure." She shivered and hugged her knees as if she were cold, a schoolgirl gesture oddly appealing in one who looked so old and frail.

Tessie was speaking in a low, rapid voice. "It was the night after you disappeared. Denise and I didn't know about the accusation of theft. I thought you had drowned in the river. Denise thought you had got into some scrape that made you ashamed to come back. That night Denise and Nan and Agatha

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all went to bed early, and Geoff had gone out to dinner to see some man in Yarborough about a portrait commission. I was alone in the living room, playing the piano and watching the moonlight on the river, when I saw a light in the boathouse.

"Then I thought Denise was right. I thought you were in such trouble you were afraid to come back openly, so you had come back secretly at night to get your money and books and clothes. But if you were in trouble I wanted to help. I thought of a gambling debt or a drunken party, nothing worse.

"I put on a dark cloak—this same cloak; Lyons velvet wears for years—and I went down to the boathouse. It was like a dream even then. Now it's vague as the memory of a dream. It was a lovely night, a fresh breeze on the water and the rippling sound of little waves. I wasn't wearing anything that would rustle. I don't believe I made a sound on the path."

"You always had the lightest step in the world, the most softly drawn breath," murmured Bly.

"I was wearing a dress something like this that floated around me, and I had that feeling of drifting or flying that you have in some dreams. And it had all the inconsequence of a dream, for when I walked into the locker room I came face to face with a stranger."

"Tramp or burglar?"

"Oh, no, not a criminal type. An educated man. Subtle and clever and—evil. I never knew his name. I hardly saw his face. The light I'd seen was his flashlight. He turned it on me while he stood in darkness. He was about your height. I thought he was you until he spoke. I said 'Frank, you're back!' He echoed me: 'Frank?' Then he said, 'Oh, the boatman. Were you fond of him?'

"His tone was nasty. I said, 'I shall telephone the police that someone has broken into our boathouse.' I was too angry to be frightened. But he didn't seem afraid of the police. He laughed and said, 'I'd like to talk to the police myself!'

"The boathouse extension was disconnected after you left. I ran up the path and lost my way in the woods. It must have been fifteen minutes before I reached the house. I was taking off my cloak in the hall when Geoff came in. I knew something dreadful had happened. His eyes were—what word can I use? Tortured. Yet I knew the pain was not physical. The dream was turning into a nightmare. I was snatching at reality when I said, 'Geoff, there's a man in our boathouse, a stranger.'

"Geoff dismissed that in two bald sentences. 'Tessie, there is no man in the boathouse now. Forget that you saw him!' Then he went on in a dull, dead voice, speaking words I shall never forget. 'Tessie, if anyone should ever ask you where I was this evening, you are to make

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just one answer. You are to say that I was here with you all the time.'

"I was lucky. No one ever asked me where Geoff had been that evening. For when the body was found everyone assumed that it was your body, and you were supposed to have been killed when you disappeared." Tessie's arms dropped from her knees and hung loosely at her sides, as if she were exhausted.

"Was this why you divorced Vanbrugh? Even though he is Nan's father?"

"I divorced Geoff because he is Nan's father." Her breast moved as if she were sighing, but he could not hear that gentle breath. "Can you imagine what it was like? Living with a man you know to be a murderer and never a word about it spoken between you? That's Geoff's way. He never spoke of unpleasant things. He's sensitive and reserved. An artist.

"I knew that if I did ask him he would deny the whole thing. He would think that the less I knew about that horror, the 'easier' it would be for me to bear it. But I couldn't let Nan grow up with—that. When I asked Geoff for a divorce he never asked me why. He knew. He might not have given up Nan so easily if it hadn't been for the doctor who said she must be sent away to boarding school."

"Yet you let Nan see him from time to time?"

"I wasn't afraid of Geoff. I knew he wasn't vicious or maniacal—dangerous to Nan or me. I'm sure he killed on impulse under tremendous provocation. It was only not knowing anything and having to live with mystery and terror, day after day. I wanted to but I couldn't. A few weeks ago, when I heard there was a stranger in town asking questions about Frank Bly, I telegraphed Geoff to stay away. Instead, he came here as soon as he could. His idea of protecting me."

"Does Nan know?"

"Of course not."

Bly looked at her almost with awe. "Do you realize what you've been telling me? If Vanbrugh did kill this man, he is also the man who tried to kill me. He may have mistaken me for this other man in the dark. That would make the second, successful attack premeditated."

"Oh, no! Geoff isn't capable of calculated violence." Tessie frowned. "Perhaps this stranger attacked you?"

"A comfortable solution." Bly's voice was arid. "Put it all on a stranger who is dead and cannot speak for himself! But why?"

"I don't know." The last word was long-drawn as a moan. "Frank, I don't want to know. I'm so afraid." She looked at him now, and he recalled the word she had used for Vanbrugh's eyes—*tortured*. "It may be something that will hurt me, and I've had enough of being hurt. Truly, I have. I suppose it's no use."

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She glanced toward the mirror with the saddest smile he had ever seen. "Would it have made a difference if I had still been the Tessie Vanbrugh you used to know?"

Bly surprised himself. "Don't, Tessie! You know that I shall go away now and forget everything."

"You'll go?" Joy leaped into her eyes. "Soon? Now? Tonight?"

"Tonight if that will make you happier. There's a late train to New York. But let me take you home first."

"Oh, no! Someone might hear us, and I'm supposed to be asleep in my own room. Alone, I can be very quiet."

"As you wish." He took one of her hands, brushed it with his lips. It was like tasting ashes.

Then she was gone, and Bly was alone in a bleak world with a bitter flavor in his mouth, the aftertaste of dead youth.

Upstairs, he threw a few necessities into an overnight bag, with the automatic he no longer cared about, then changed into his oldest, most comfortable tweeds. In the lower hall he caught a glimpse of his own grim face in the mirror as he put on his hat. He looked down as his right hand, flexing the fingers that had healed long ago. Had Geoff done that?

Suddenly he couldn't believe it. Not Geoff, the man who had fed him in the roadside diner and taken him home. But then who?

He picked up his bag.

A strange voice spoke from the living room. "In a hurry?"

Bly turned to face the arch. "Who are you?"

The man who ambled toward him was on the wrong side of fifty, shrunken and tough as old leather. His clothes were a little too prosperous, almost flashy. His stolid manner was overdone.

"I'm Archibald D. Gesell. The door was unlatched." He held out a gold badge enameled with the words: *Yarborough Police Commission.*

Bly collected his wits. "Very well, Mr. Commissioner. I can't imagine what you want of me, but—"

"No idea why I'm here?"

"None whatever." Bly tried to smile amiably as he said, "You tell me."

Gesell contemplated the toe of one boot. "Man was murdered tonight. Man you know and saw tonight. And you were sure hell-bent on making yourself scarce mighty quick."

"Who was the man?"

Gesell looked up. His eyes were small and shrewd. "Geoffrey Vanbrugh."

Tessie, Tessie, why do I always end by doubting you? It was you who said, "You'll go soon? Now? Tonight?" Did you know then that Vanbrugh was dead, that my sudden departure for New York must focus suspicion on me? And when you were spinning that fine tale about Geoff, delicate and intricate

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as everything else about you, did you know that poor Geoff could never dispute a word you told me, because he was no longer alive? Haggard and gray and old as you look, you still have magic and mystery. You can still weave the old bewitching dance around me with your eyes and hands and voice, so I believe anything you say, do anything you ask of me.

Bly looked at Gesell. "Didn't Freud say that men go through life making the same mistake again and again?"

"I don't get you."

"Never mind, Mr. Commissioner. I'm at your disposal."

Gesell looked toward the dining room. "Okay, boys; come on in. Mind if we go through that bag of yours, Mr. Longworth?"

"Not at all." As heavy footfalls clattered across the floor, Bly remembered too late the automatic in the suitcase.

The sky turned from pale gray to a paler blue, bathed in the pearl light that comes just before dawn. Then it was a fiery rose-red. And still Gesell's monotone went on.

Why had Bly walked to and from the Vanbrughs' home instead of taking his car? Why hadn't he gone to bed when he got home? Why was he carrying an automatic? Could his housekeeper substantiate his claim that he had been alone reading in the living room for several hours, then decided on impulse to catch the late train to New York? Was he quite sure that he'd had no visitors?

"No visitors." Bly lit his twentieth cigarette. "I walked to and from the Vanbrughs' just because I like to walk. I sat up late reading because I like to read. Now will you tell me how Vanbrugh died? And when?"

"We're asking the questions, Mr. Longworth. What's your business?"

"I write."

"For newspapers or magazines?"

"Neither. I write books about foreign countries."

"What was the name of your last book?"

Inwardly Bly cursed the modern publisher's fancy for eccentric titles with promotion possibilities. *"In Thought Again.* Asia. Matthew Arnold's poem. Asia bowing in deep disdain and plunging in thought again. That's the name of my book."

"I see." Obviously he didn't see. "You write under your own name, Mr. Longworth?"

Tessie and Nan, Denise and Strawn—have you already told the police that I am Frank Bly? Their records show that Geoffrey Vanbrugh was a witness in the unsolved murder of Frank Bly. If I'm identified as Bly they'll dig out the whole story.

Bly took a breath. "All my books are signed Stephen Longworth."

Gesell might not be bookish, but he was sharp. "And that is your own name?"

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A detective spoke up. "That's how he signed the lease for this house. I saw it, because my sister works in the real-estate office."

"Okay." Gesell rose. "You're not to leave Yarborough until we give the word."

The door slammed.

Bly let out his breath and went to the telephone. Like an automaton he went through the familiar motions of smoking with one hand and dialing with the other. A distant bell throbbed. A gruff voice said, "Mrs. Vanbrugh's residence. Who's calling?"

His conscious mind was far away, his oldest reflexes in control as he answered, "Frank Bly."

He slammed the telephone into its cradle, breaking the connection. They couldn't trace a dial call, but that gruff voice had certainly been the voice of a policeman stationed in the home of the murdered man to screen all visitors and telephone calls.

Gesell wouldn't believe in a voice from the dead. Gesell would start looking for a stranger in the neighborhood who might be Bly under another name. If Stephen Longworth was going to act at all, he would have to act fast. At any moment now he might lose all freedom of movement. Holding him as a material witness, they would call it.

He dialed Strawn's number, and Strawn himself answered.

"Longworth speaking. I must talk to you, but not over the phone."

"Could you come here? The police have left us. I don't believe they'll be back today."

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

Bly remembered Strawn's house as a simple bungalow, weather-beaten shingles in a tangle of underbrush. Now two wings had been added, and the whole was freshly painted white with wine-red shutters. Even the brush had been cleared away to make a terraced garden descending to the river by easy stages.

A maid showed Bly into the living room, the original bungalow with all inside walls removed. Denise reclined on a chaise near one of the garden windows, her ample figure disguised by a loose, cream-colored housecoat, her small plump feet shod in cherry-colored satin that matched her lipstick. Strawn looked as limp and wilted as the white shirt and dinner jacket he had been wearing ever since last night. Between them stood a small table with a breakfast tray and an extra cup for Bly.

"Thanks." He drank the coffee gratefully. "What happened?"

Strawn groaned. "We left just after you did. We got home as our clock was striking two. Denise went to bed. I stayed downstairs to drink a whiskey and soda. I was just finishing it at a quarter of three when the police came."

"And Vanbrugh?"

"He stood in the doorway as we drove off. Apparently he didn't go

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back into the house. He sat on the terrace a while—there were cigarette butts—and then wandered alone down to the site of the old boathouse. It was Nan who noticed the light still on in the living room windows at two thirty. From her bedroom windows she could see the light reflected on the grass outside. She went downstairs. The living room was empty. Then she realized that she hadn't heard her father come in, so she went down to the river."

Nan, Nan, will you never learn caution?

"He wasn't in the water," said Strawn bluntly. "He was lying on the old pier, the back of his head crushed. He couldn't have done it himself. And it wasn't the fall. He had fallen forward. Nan called the police. Tessie was fast asleep when they reached the house."

Fast asleep? I doubt it, Tessie. If you were in bed at all you were wide-eyed, staring at darkness, longing for sleep. But thank heavens you got back in time before the police arrived.

"It's the second time Nan has found a body." Denise frowned. "If she hadn't been so little the first time—"

"Well?" Bly spoke sharply.

"Oh, I don't know, but there have been child murderers. Who can tell what goes on in the mind of a child? It can't understand right and wrong."

Bly controlled his first flash of anger. But it lent force to his voice as he turned on Strawn. "You hear that? Even Nan is going to be suspected now! Isn't it time you told the whole truth?"

"Bly, it's not my secret," protested Strawn. "I can't."

"No?" Bly's tone was ominous. "Either you tell me now or I tell the police you're hiding something. I want the whole story now."

Strawn looked utterly defeated, eyes dull, mouth slack. "Can't you guess the truth?"

"I don't want to guess. I want facts."

Strawn winced, He went on in a lifeless voice. "That man whose body was identified as yours. It was Tessie who killed him."

No, Tessie, I don't believe it! You might beguile a man, bewitch him and trick him, but you wouldn't kill, would you?

Bly's voice was expressionless. "Why do you think so?"

"It goes back to the night after you disappeared. Geoff came here late and woke me. He told me to throw on some clothes. He needed help. He led me down to the boathouse pier and—well, the body was there. Dead. I said, 'Geoff, did you kill him?' Geoff answered, 'Of course not. I heard a cry as I was getting out of my car. I came here and found him, lying just as you see him now.'

"I was sleepy, perhaps impatient. I said, 'So what? Do you call the police while I wait here?' Geoff

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shook his head. 'No, Dick, we can't do that. Not after what he said just before he died.'

"That woke me up. I said, 'He was alive?' Geoff replied, 'He was dying. He died as I knelt beside him. Legally, the words of a dying man are evidence, not hearsay, even at second-hand. Death is supposed to dig the truth out of people.

"I knew then that it was going to be something pretty terrible. I said, 'For the love of heaven, Geoff, what did he say?'

"Geoff answered in that dreadfully quiet voice people use for the really bad things of life: 'He said that Tessie killed him.'

"It was a shock, even to me. Think what it must have been for Geoff, her husband. You know Tessie. You know how impossible it is to associate her with ugliness. I had sense enough to ask, 'He said it in those words?'

"Geoff shook his head. 'Not in just those words. He was gasping for breath and it came out brokenly: *"I have pain . . . at the head . . . Your wife she is vicious, a murderess . . . she killed me."*'" Strawn buried his face in his hands.

"So you and Vanbrugh pushed the body into the water hoping it would be carried out to sea? Or at least far down the river?"

Strawn nodded without uncovering his face.

"You were a good friend to Vanbrugh. And to Tessie."

Again Strawn nodded.

Denise was lighting a cigarette in an ivory holder mounted in gold. Her eyes were skeptical but tolerant, intensely Gallic. "That friendship!" She shrugged.

"Who was he?" demanded Bly.

"I have no idea. I never saw him before."

"Why did you and Vanbrugh identify him later as Frank Bly?"

"Nan gave us the idea. Mistaking the body for yours when she found it face down in the water. Tessie had no motive for murdering you, a boy she had befriended and mothered. She must have had some motive for murdering this other man. His identity would have revealed that motive and led the police back to Tessie.

"We thought it was safe because we thought you were dead anyway. Drowned. Otherwise, you wouldn't have left your own money in the boathouse. You'd either have taken it with you or come back for it."

Strawn dropped his hands and looked up. "Now perhaps you can imagine how we felt four years later when I received that five thousand dollars anonymously. It couldn't be anything but conscience money from you. It proved that you were alive, that there was one man in the world who would know instantly, if he ever returned to Yarborough, that the dead body buried as Bly was not Bly. One man who would be sure to believe that Geoff and I had killed the other man, since we

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had identified him falsely. Who but a murderer would have a motive for false identification?

"I told Geoff he ought to tell Tessie you were still alive. But he wouldn't. He said they had never discussed the dead man at all. He even managed to smile as he said, 'What did you expect, Dick? A man can't go to his wife and say, "Well, dear, I've just learned you murdered someone last night. Anyone I know?"'

"Geoff couldn't accuse Tessie to her face of murder. She would have denied it. She's a romantic. She cannot face unpleasant realities. She would probably lie to herself about it and believe her own lie. Telling herself that she didn't really mean to kill him, only to stun him. That he staggered back when she struck with the hammer, so he really killed himself.

"I asked then if Tessie had never said a word to him. Reluctantly he answered, 'Only once. That night I found the man dying she was in the hall when I finally got back to the house. She said something about seeing a strange man at the boathouse. Pretty plain, wasn't it? She was trying to find out if I had seen or heard anything. Almost a confession.

"I said there was no man there now. I said she should forget she had seen one. Then I realized something. She had been alone. She had no alibi and it must be worrying her. I saw a way to reassure her. For I had been alone, too, until I wakened you. So I was free to tell her that if anyone ever asked her where I had been that evening she was to say that she and I had been together all the time. That was practically telling her I knew, wasn't it? If she had wanted to confide in me I gave her the opportunity. But she didn't.'"

Strawn paused, and then said, "That's just the way Geoff told it to me."

"And I never knew! All these years!" Denise crushed her cigarette stub furiously. "Oh, Dick, you were not fair to me!"

"I wanted to spare you," he insisted. "Just as Geoff wanted to spare Tessie."

Bly was grinning sardonically. "So I was right. You and Tessie and Vanbrugh were all holding some things back last night."

"But it was you who exploded the bombshell," returned Strawn. "Your story of the attack on you fifteen years ago. Geoff was deeply disturbed and I was the only one who knew why. He couldn't believe that Tessie would have done such a thing. If she hadn't, why, then, perhaps she hadn't killed the other man either and the whole thing was a ghastly misunderstanding between them. On the other hand, if she had tried to kill twice, she must really be dangerous and he had done a wicked thing to protect her for so long."

"Vicious . . . a murderess . . ."

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Denise repeated the words of the dying man as if she could not quite believe them. "She was all that and worse if she killed Geoff last night."

"But why would Tessie kill Geoff?" demanded Strawn.

Denise sighed. "She didn't know Geoff had confided in you, Dick. She thought Geoff was the only man in the world who knew she was guilty. And she was afraid he might break down now and admit it under the new pressure from Mr. Longworth—I mean, Bly. So, in a way, Mr. Bly is responsible for Geoff's death."

"Am I?" Bly walked over to the window. On the river a white-sailed boat was tacking against the wind, buoyant as a bird, accenting by contrast the wormlike progress of a long line of loaded barges.

"That cabinet of yours, Mrs. Strawn," said Bly. "It was brought to Yarborough by barge, wasn't it?"

"Yes, what of it?" Denise was daintily surprised.

"Those barges made me think of it again. Somehow, the cabinet from France seems to have been the starting point of all this business. Money changed hands because of it and then disappeared. The same evening I was accused of the theft and nearly killed at the boathouse. One day later another man, a stranger, was actually killed in the very place where I had been attacked, and then, five weeks later when his body was found, he was buried under my name. And finally the boathouse burned down. The pattern is queer because the connecting links are missing."

Denise turned to Bly with a brilliant smile. "Just why did you send the money back four years later?"

Bly returned the smile. "You forget, Mrs. Strawn, I have never admitted that it was I who took the money or that it was I who returned it."

Strawn was irritated. "Why don't you admit it now? Shouldn't you tell the police? If the whole story comes out you can clear up that one point for them. And you must have taken it or you wouldn't have sent it back."

"I admit nothing."

"Why not? No one will prosecute now you've returned it."

"But people would think less well of me, wouldn't they?"

"I don't know that they would. A boy of seventeen, without family or friends or a penny of his own. A man who went straight afterward, made a success of his life, and returned the money. Lots of people have darker secrets than that!"

"Have they?" Bly seemed to be turning this over in his mind. Again he looked at Denise. "How valuable is that cabinet today?"

"It can't be valued in money. There are only a few examples of Sixteenth Century inlay left in the world today. The most famous, one quite like this, is in a museum in New York."

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"How did your father acquire such a museum piece?"

"That's an amusing story. He bought it for two hundred francs from a peasant in Brittany who was using it as a rabbit hutch. The peasant didn't know the value of inlay. My father did."

"So there you are."

It was Nan's voice. She was standing just inside the French door, hatless, her hair wind-blown. The skin around her eyes was dark as a bruise.

"Nan!" Bly took a step toward her.

"If you hadn't come back, if you had let the dead past bury its dead, he might be alive." There was no reproach in her voice. It was dull and flat, tearless as her eyes.

"My dear child!" Denise rose and put an arm around the girl's shoulders. "Let me ring for fresh coffee. I'm sure you haven't had breakfast."

Listlessly Nan moved away from the embrace. "I don't want coffee or anything else." She turned to Bly again. "Why did you play that trick on the police?"

"Trick?"

"That telephone call. Saying Frank Bly and then cutting the connection."

"It was a slip of the tongue."

"A policeman answered the telephone. Gesell questioned Mother again. Mostly about you. She had to tell him that Stephen Longworth was Frank Bly. Gesell was annoyed. Mother had to tell him everything then. He thinks either you or Mother killed Father."

Strawn rose heavily. "I'd better see Gesell and tell him all the things I didn't tell him last night. I can't stand by and see an innocent man suspected."

Denise looked quizzical. "What you really mean, dear, is that you're afraid he'll suspect you if he finds out all these things before you volunteer them!"

When he had gone, she arched one silky, black brow. "Poor Dick! He thinks realism is cynicism. He lives in a world of illusion."

"Nan!" There was an urgent note in Bly's voice. "Do you think I killed your father?"

Time was suspended as she looked into his eyes. At last she whispered, "No."

"Then let me take you home."

He turned the car into a narrow track through the woods. He spoke quietly. "Nan, when are you going to tell me the truth?"

"About what?" She avoided his eyes.

He stopped the car and shut off the engine. He turned to look at her. "The money. You took it, didn't you?"

She kept her profile toward him, eyes veiled by thick, golden lashes. "How did you know?"

"It came to me in a flash of realization four years after I left Yarborough. When the money was sto-

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len the others were all out on the river, except you and me. That's why they were so sure I had taken it. But I hadn't, and there wasn't anybody else but you. They never even thought of you, did they?"

"No." Still, she avoided his eyes. "It was you who sent the money anonymously?"

"Yes."

"A few thousand didn't mean much to me at the time. I was making plenty and I was out in the Persian hinterland where there were few ways to spend it. Though I hadn't taken the money I began to feel like an accessory, because I knew who had taken it and I wasn't telling.

"I couldn't write and tell them. That wouldn't have been fair to you. You were only nine then. I got to thinking about you and how you might have been struggling under a burden of secret guilt for the last four years, so I yielded to an impulse. I directed my New York bank to send the money in cash, anonymously, to Strawn.

"I assumed he would tell your parents and you would hear about it and feel better. In the back of my mind there was a shadowy idea of letting four people in Yarborough know that Frank Bly had not forgotten them, including the one who had tried to kill him. I wanted that one to know that some day Frank Bly might come back. But I had to do it anonymously so no one would ask me who had taken the money."

"You must have been quite fond of me when I was a child?"

"I was. Now tell me why you took the money."

"It's so silly. I'm ashamed to tell you. Try to think back to your own childhood and remember what the mind of a child is like. Do you recall that you were going to make me a doll's house out of the packing case the cabinet came in? And we were saving violet-and-silver wrapping paper from Mother's boxes of candy for the dollhouse wallpaper? That last afternoon you took the packing case down to the boathouse and started work on it. And you said we needed just one more candy-box wrapper.

"I wandered into the locker room and saw what looked like a new box of candy. I took it for the sake of the wrapping paper. I was going to give the box to Mother. I knew she wouldn't mind, because I had done that before. I had just got the package up to my room at the house when Agatha called me to my five o'clock supper. I ran downstairs, leaving it there, unopened, and forgot about it until that night.

"My room was over Father's study. I heard voices, yours and his and Dick's, so loud they woke me up. I crept downstairs barefoot in pajamas and listened at the door. I heard them accuse you of stealing money. Dick said it was wrapped in colored paper from a candy box and he'd left it in the locker room. Then I knew what I had taken.

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"Frank, I was scared to death. I could tell by your voice that you were frightened. And I was only five. I heard the word *police*. I thought that they would send me to prison for years. I slipped upstairs and unwrapped the package to make sure the money was inside. It was, and I remembered I had seen a fire when I passed the living-room door.

"I went downstairs again. Luck was with me. You were just crossing the lawn toward the boathouse, but Father was still in the study and Dick was in the dining room. The living room was empty. I put the money and the wrapping paper on the fire and waited until they were burned to ashes. Then I went back upstairs to bed and put my head under the covers and cried, without making any noise."

"And you never told your parents?"

"Never. There are so many things children cannot tell their parents. Next day it was pretty bad when I heard you had disappeared. Later, when I found that dead body face down in the water, my guilt made me sure that it was your body —that you had killed yourself because of what I had done to you. My burning the money and keeping silent had made it impossible for you to prove that you were not a thief."

"Poor little Nan!" He put his hand over hers. "No wonder you were ill!"

"You forgive me? Now?"

"I would forgive you anything, any time." He took her in his arms. "Now, Nan, at last I know why I came back to Yarborough."

Slowly tears welled under the tawny lashes. "Frank, I'm afraid. Who did it? Who killed Father? Of course I know it wasn't Mother or you—but who?"

He frowned, looking down the empty road. "It must be the same person who attacked me and killed that other man. When a murderer kills he does it to produce a definite result by eliminating the man he kills. For all practical purposes I was dead for at least four years, until I sent the money to Strawn suggesting that Frank Bly might be alive. What happened in those four years, when the murderer believed I was dead and eliminated forever, that would not have happened if I'd been here alive and active?"

"Mother and Father got a divorce. Dick and Denise got married. Mother and Father became poor. Dick and Denise became rich. I was ill; then I got better and was sent away to school and college. That's all that happened to any of us, really. Is there any one of those things that would not have happened if you had been here?"

"I don't know." Bly was still frowning thoughtfully. "It was the day the cabinet came that this began."

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"You unpacked it yourself," Nan reminded him. "Was it empty or was there anything inside?"

"Only an old key." Abruptly he switched on the ignition.

"Where are we going?" asked Nan.

"To your house, to take another look at the cabinet!"

The police had gone. The living room was empty. Three tall windows framed the sky, three panels of a pure cobalt blue. Nan crossed the room to the cabinet. Lovingly she touched the inlay.

Bly took the handle of hand-wrought iron and let down the drop leaf. There were two shelves inside, record albums on one, a pile of sheet music on the other. Behind the albums lay a flat parcel of old newspaper. Bly opened it.

He was holding a great iron key, its bow star-shaped, its bit wrought in a pattern of lilies and roses. The paper fluttered to the floor, a newspaper fragment, old, brown, crumbling at the edges.

Nan picked it up. "French, dated May 2, 1924. I suppose the packers just used the newspapers of the day. What a pity they weren't saved. Think what interesting reading they'd make in 1949!"

"I left them in the boathouse," said Bly. "They were probably burned when it caught fire."

Nan was still musing as she looked down at the fragment in her hand. "French columnists don't have to worry about any libel laws."

"What do you have there?"

"The end of a column signed Pierre Bourrelle. All about a murder trial. Some woman was acquitted of murdering her husband. He says the evidence proved her guilty. He blames the verdict on the traditional gallantry of a French jury."

Bly nodded. "They acquit most women murderers, the guilty and the innocent. Who was this one?"

"There's no name here." Nan turned the fragment over. "Oh, what luck! Here's the beginning of the column on the other side. This murderer's name was ——" Suddenly her voice blanched. "—— Denise de Beaupré."

"Did I hear my own name?"

Nan started as if she were the one trapped and guilty. Denise stood just inside the farthest of the French doors, still as a woman painted on a backdrop of cobalt. Her smile was brightly enameled with fuchsia lipstick. Her dress was black, with emeralds at one wrist, and a dark fur cape hanging from her shoulders. The leather bag in one hand was emerald green.

"I had a suspicion you two were up to something when you left me. That's why I came here."

Still smiling, she descended three shallow steps into the room.

Bly rose and stepped between the two women. Nan was no actress. Her face was almost as white as her blouse. Bly achieved a smile for Denise. "We were admiring the cab-

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inet. I wonder you had the heart to part with it."

"In those days thousands of dollars meant a great deal to me." Denise was crossing the room, tottering on her tiny, high-heeled shoes. She subsided prettily into a wing chair.

Bly followed and stood before her, resting one hand on the mantelshelf as he had last night after dinner. "I suppose that was why you took the risk of having the cabinet brought to this country."

"Risk? It was insured."

"I wasn't thinking of insurable risk. It wasn't the inlaid cabinet itself that started this chain of events fifteen years ago. It was the old newspapers the cabinet was packed in—French newspapers of the month and year when you were tried for murder in Paris. Evidently you didn't know the packers had used them for wrapping until that morning when the packing case arrived and I broke it open on the terrace. I remember your gasp—like a cry of pain. I thought you were afraid I would hurt the cabinet with my penknife when I slashed the twine that held the padding in place.

"Your one hope was to get rid of those newspapers before anyone who understood French looked at them. But you had no chance to do so. When I was alone on the terrace with Strawn I told him I could read French, and he said I could take the newspapers down to the boathouse. He must have mentioned that to you later when you were all out on the river in the cruiser. So you had to kill me and burn the boathouse where those papers were stored.

"With those papers burned unread there wasn't one chance in a thousand that anyone in a small American town like Yarborough would ever hear of anything that had happened so long ago and far away as an obscure murder trial in Paris in 1924. Ironically, you didn't know about the old key also wrapped in newspaper. You were at the far end of the room when Vanbrugh and Tessie discovered that, and it's been hidden behind this pile of record albums ever since.

"Today I learned that the man buried under my name spoke as he lay dying. He said, *'I have pain at the head . . . your wife she is vicious, a murderess . . .* The words are English, but the sentence structure is French. When I heard that, I knew he must have been French, and that you were the one most likely to have killed him. Vanbrugh, who heard him, thought the words, 'your wife,' referred to Tessie.

"But last night you said that your friends in France thought you were already married to Strawn when you sent for the cabinet. This Frenchman prowling around the Vanbrugh place where you were a guest saw and recognized you. The only man living in the same house was Vanbrugh. Believing you were married, the Frenchman mistook Vanbrugh for your husband, Strawn, whom he had never seen.

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'Your wife' meant Denise de Beaupré, not Tessie Vanbrugh.

"Last night you claimed that you were alone in this living room at the time I was attacked. Now I know you lied. The living room was empty then. Nan, a child of five, came in and found it empty at the very time you said you were here. Fortunately for her, she never mentioned that to anyone but me.

"Vanbrugh was less fortunate. He could see the path to the boathouse from his study window. Fifteen years ago he watched me go down that path. He must have seen you follow me, but your presence did not rouse his suspicion until last night, when he learned for the first time of the murderous attack on me just afterward. He didn't give you away when we were all together last night. He was too good a friend for that. He would wait for a private explanation.

"So you came back to his house a second time last night while your husband was drinking alone in his own living room. You met Vanbrugh on the terrace, doubtless by prearrangement, and you induced him to go down to the pier with you, pretending you could only explain what had happened on the site of the attack. Once safely there you killed him.

"All along I have realized that something must have happened to the Vanbrughs or Strawn or you in the last fifteen years that would not have happened if I had not been eliminated. Now I see what that thing was. Your marriage to Strawn. You were beautiful and I am sure that Strawn loved you. No ordinary obstacle would have kept him from marrying you—poverty, illness, scandal. But would he have married a woman who had murdered her first husband? A woman who was free only because she had been acquitted by an obviously susceptible jury? I think not. And evidently you thought the same way.

"Now, tell me one more thing. Who was the Frenchman?"

Her face was still as a mask of white plaster with fuchsia-painted lips. Those lips scarcely moved as she whispered, "Pierre Bourrelle. A journalist. A friend of my husband's who hated me. He came here all the way from France when he heard of my second marriage. He prowled about looking for evidence against me. He had the presumption to say that my second husband should be warned. I was not married to Dick yet. Of course I killed Bourrelle.

"I made two dreadful mistakes: Letting my father's lawyer know I was going to marry Dick when I wrote asking for the cabinet. But I was so proud of that! And then the other was using my true name in America, Denise de Beaupré. That was how Bourrelle traced me. But what could I do? The name was on my passport. I might want to leave the country at any time and I would have to have a passport. And I soon found that no one in America

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had ever heard of Denise de Beaupré for good or evil."

Bly felt a hard grip on his arm. Nan was standing close behind him. Anger blazed in her tawny eyes as she looked at Denise, sunk in self-pity. Nan spoke. "I can understand your killing Bourrelle. He was like a blackmailer, only worse, because he was doing it for malice, not just for money. But I cannot understand your killing my father, your oldest and best friend here, just to save your own skin. And I can't understand your trying to kill Frank. Suppose he *had* read those papers? He'd have seen you were acquitted."

"And he would also have seen in every editorial column that my acquittal meant nothing!" Fiercely Denise turned to Bly. "Would you have kept silent? After learning I was going to marry Dick Strawn?"

"I don't know," admitted Bly.

"Even now you have no case against me," she went on more calmly. "I was acquitted of the murder of my first husband. There is no conclusive evidence that I killed Bourrelle or Geoff or that I tried to kill you. All you really have is a motive for my trying to kill you."

"Then why did you admit all these things?" gasped Nan.

Denise was looking at Bly, desperately. "You understand, don't you? It's my way of asking for mercy. I'm telling you everything so you may see my side of it. I love Dick Strawn. That's the whole story in four words."

"Mercy? For you!" Nan's scorn was savage.

Bly spoke gravely. "I don't suppose I shall say anything to the police."

"Frank!"

Bly went on as if Nan had not spoken. "But I shall give this newspaper fragment to Dick Strawn."

The red mouth in the white face twisted, pulling muscles out of shape, plowing lines from lips to chin. There was something close to madness in the bright, dry glaze of the eyes. She whispered, "I don't believe you would do *that?*"

"I must do it." Bly's face was stony. "Strawn must know the truth now."

The catch of her green leather bag snapped open. The small gun seemed to leap into her hand with a motion of its own. Nan covered her eyes with her hands, but she could not shut out the loud report that shattered the stillness. Denise took two steps on her absurdly tight, high-heeled shoes, then lurched and sprawled heavily.

Only when he knew Denise was dead did Bly turn to look at Nan. She was sobbing as he took her in his arms. "That was dangerous. And brutal."

"Yes." He looked down at the head on his shoulder. "I've been told that I take too many risks. And that I have no mercy for my enemies. But a good hater makes a good lover."

He kissed her.

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 320th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a tough, hard-hitting story by a new writer who has a knack for using words pictorially . . .

The author, Michael W. Fedo, is a speech instructor and director of drama at Stout State University in Menomonie, Wisconsin. (What a great big wonderful country we live in!) Mr. Fedo formerly taught high-school English and coached football and tennis. He writes: "My childhood was pleasantly happy, a factor, I'm told, which doesn't breed successful writers . . . Until a few months ago I was one of 200,000 eligible bachelors in Wisconsin; however I am now married, and my wife and I and a German Shepherd named Edythe live in a small lake-side cottage near the University."

MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

by MICHAEL W. FEDO

JACKAL HAWKES WAS NEVER A REAL friend of mine, but I'd known him slightly for several years. He was much better off financially than I because he had gotten the breaks and he was ruthless. I had nerve, mind you, but getting shot in the leg after stealing a car when I was sixteen left me with a permanent limp.

But Jackal was doing all right—or so they said. I know that a lot of people were afraid of him. He "hit" people for the Morry Curran crowd. I never figured Jackal was much smarter than me, but maybe Curran hired him because he worked cheap. They used to say that Jackal would kill a man—any man—for a hundred bucks. That was how he got his kicks.

I'll say this for him, he was reliable. He always delivered on schedule. Jackal used to brag how indispensable he was to Curran's organization. He always called it an organization, not a mob. Jackal was proud of his work. He did good work.

I used to see Jackal from time to time. Occasionally after he'd made a hit he'd stop in one of the bars where I sometimes went before work. I'm straight now—work as a night watchman at the grain elevators. It's not much of a job, but

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with my record and all, I guess I'm lucky. I keep quiet because the boss doesn't know about my record. I've even changed my name. I'm called Mooch Miller.

Anyway, Jackal would be around, and maybe he'd wave to me. Not like some of the rest of the boys I'd kept in touch with.

Ralph Tomas, for instance, always used to come and see me at the waterfront. He'd buy me a drink or two and maybe give me a fiver now and then for some information about foreign ships I might know about. I think it had something to do with drugs and connections getting the stuff in and out of the country, but I don't know for sure. He asks about ships; I answer about ships. Ralph is a good man. I like him. Last Christmas he gave me twenty for no reason at all.

But Jackal, he's strictly small time. I don't think he's ever bought me a drink. He was too busy telling anyone who would listen how he'd go about killing a man. He'd use either a knife or a gun. It didn't really matter to Jackal.

One night Jackal finished off two guys—Angie Moroni and Tough Tommy Green. Both of them were minor hoods who used to work for Curran. But they broke away and started to muscle in on the juke-box trade. So Curran had Jackal nail them.

It would have worked out fine except Green lived long enough to put the finger on Jackal.

Now, knowing Jackal like I do, I know he isn't afraid of the cops. He knows where to hide out, usually, or he figures Curran will fly him to Rio or some place like that. He told me he'd been to Rio once before when the heat was on.

But this time it would be different. For once, Jackal had messed up the job. Green had talked and Jackal knew Curran would be looking for him. He had no friends and he was no longer any use to Curran. He was a marked man.

Well, I keep on working, minding my own business. But two nights after the Moroni and Green killing, when I'm making my first tour of the area, all of a sudden I see this man creeping around behind a shack.

"Hey!" I holler, and I'm starting to sweat. My mouth goes dry and I'd like to run, but the bum leg won't let me, so I figure I might just as well follow up. And I'm thinking how stupid I was to take the job when the company won't even arm the watchman. They figure a punk would take off when he sees the watchman's light. Anyway, I take a couple of slow steps forward.

"Mooch."

I hear this sort of loud whisper calling me.

"Who is it?" I call out, not too loud.

"Mooch, over here. Come over here, will you?"

Well, I'm not taking any chances, so I pick up a heavy piece of wood

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and I start over to where I saw that man duck. Then I said, "Come out where I can see you."

"Quiet—for God's sake, quiet!" this voice says.

Then he stands up and in the moonlight I can see it's Jackal. I go closer. "Jackal?" I say.

"Yeah, it's me," he says. "Mooch, you gotta help me." He's shivering like a scared puppy. He hasn't shaved in a few days and he's dirty. Even in the moonlight I can see his jacket is sweated through.

"Jackal, you come to me?" I never saw him scared before. But now he's the hunted instead of the hunter and it shakes him up.

"Mooch, you're the only one I know in this town who doesn't hate my guts. You're the only one."

I look him over again. "Well, I don't know how to handle this kind of thing, Jackal. Cops might be down here any time lookin' for drugs and stuff like that."

Jackal grabs my hand and squeezes it. "You've got to help me, Mooch. Just for a few days. I'll get hold of my sister and she'll get me out of here. Mooch, just a few days."

I'm standing there hesitating and thinking.

"Mooch, I'll make it worth your time. I've got three hundred bucks on me right now. It's yours, Mooch. All of it."

"Three hundred bucks to hide a murderer? That ain't much."

"Mooch, there'll be more, much more. You gotta help me!"

"Well . . ." I look at Jackal and think about how he came to me for help. Me, stupid Mooch. Nothing but a gimpy nightwatchman. "I'll see what I can do, Jackal," I say.

"Thanks, pal," he says. "You got anything to eat? I ain't et for two whole days."

"I got my lunch in the shack. You can have some of that."

"Well, hurry it up, Mooch. And get me some place, quick." Jackal starts right in to give me orders. But I'm in no big hurry.

"How about that three hundred, Jackal?"

He takes out his knife. "You get me where I'm safe first, Mooch," he says, with an ugly sneer on his face.

I'm not about to fall for his bluff and I tell him so. "You need me, Jackal. Kill me and you're still in trouble. So if you want a place to hide out, hand over that three hundred. Right now."

Well, Jackal sees I'm standing my ground, and he knows I'm right. I got to hold back a smile. It's downright funny to see the Jackal back off. He puts his knife away and doesn't say anything. Then he reaches into his wallet and takes out fifteen twenty-dollar bills and hands them to me. "You better not cross me, Mooch," he says.

I act like I'm paying no attention. "This way, Jackal," I say, and I lead him off behind the shack and we walk about a block to the old grain elevators, right on the pier.

"Where you takin' me?" he de-

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mands. "You ain't playin' no games with me, are you?"

"Jackal, you gotta trust me. I'm your only chance," I say and keep walking.

I had my keys and I open a rusty door to Elevator Number Five. The door was ground level, but these doors are hardly used on elevators except when clean-up crews go in. Ships are loaded and unloaded automatically through chutes and conveyors.

"In here, Jackal," I order. He follows me.

"What is this?" Jackal says and he looks around. Naturally he can't see anything because it's dark.

I turn on my lantern. Huge empty space all around.

"I ain't stayin' here," Jackal says.

"What'd you expect, the Waldorf-Astoria?" I smile at putting him down. "This is the only safe place in town," I tell him. "We're in an abandoned grain elevator. They'll be tearing it down in a month or so, but you'll be safe until you can make a break."

"Yeah, but what if someone comes in here?" Jackal shivers.

"There ain't no one coming in here. It's always locked and the only other guy who has a key besides me is the superintendent, and he's out of town."

Jackal scratches his chin and says, "Well, I don't like it."

"Listen," I say, "it's safe here. I'll bring you food, blankets, newspapers, while you lay low. Nobody'd ever look in an abandoned grain elevator, especially one that's locked from the outside."

I can see Jackal is coming around. "All right," he says, "but bring me some food, will you? I'm starvin'."

I go back to the shack and get my lunch—a couple of liverwurst sandwiches and an apple. Jackal eats all of it.

"Get me some steak or something good next time, Mooch. That was terrible. You just don't know how to eat right. Can't blame you though. You never were in the money."

"I like liverwurst, Jackal," I tell him.

"Yeah, well I want some solid meat. And I'd like a couple bottles of wine and some cigars. Maybe you can get me an air mattress and bring me some hot water so I can clean up and shave."

"Who's gonna pay for all this fancy livin'?" I ask him.

"I'll take care of it, Mooch. You just see to it that I get what I want."

Now I'm not that dumb. "You had three hundred dollars when you came here tonight. You gave it to me. Where you gonna get more?"

Jackal gets this thoughtful look in his eyes. I had my lantern pointed at him. "Mooch, I've got five thousand stashed in a locker at the bus depot. I got the key in my pocket. I'll give you the key. You buy what I need and you can keep five hundred for yourself. Okay?"

I nodded.

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He looks at me hard. "But if you cross me, Mooch, I'll get you. I swear it."

I say good night to Jackal and go on to finish my rounds.

Next afternoon as soon as I wake up, I go out shopping. I buy a thick steak, some eggs, two bottles of red wine, a couple of girlie magazines, and a bunch of cigars.

After I get home I fry the steak and boil the eggs. I grab my extra blanket, pack all the stuff in a cardboard box, wait until 9:10, then catch my bus to work.

"Took ya long enough," Jackal growls when I unlock the elevator.

"I'm sorry if the steak is cold," I say. "I had to carry it all the way from home."

Jackal jerks the box away from me and immediately digs into the meat and eggs. I watch him eat. He tears at the steak, holding it in both hands and washing it down with great swallows of wine.

The wine seems to loosen his tongue and he starts retelling with relish how he done in Moroni and Green. "Moroni was scared, man. He knew I was lookin' for him and there was one scared punk. Green was too stupid to know I might be lookin' for him. Then I had 'em both in my sights over in the alley between Fiftieth and Selmer. They were hoisting one of Curran's machines and it was heavy for 'em. Then whammo! I get Moroni in the neck. A good shot because Curran wanted him to suffer. I figure Green would get the same but he jumps back and catches one in the chest instead. I thought I got him in the heart, but I didn't. Only caved in his lung." Jackal pauses and lights a cigar. Then he takes another long swallow of wine.

"Well, he ain't sufferin' no more," I say.

Jackal laughs harshly. You only need to look at him to know he enjoys killing. He's almost finished with the second bottle of wine and he goes on.

"Then I went over and looked down at that punk Moroni. The double-crossing bum was still alive. I took out my knife and he was still breathin', so I finished him off. Zip, zip, and he's a dead goon."

I'm sitting there in silence, letting him complete the story. Finally he gets down to business.

"My sister is Paula Dorman," he says. "She lives in St. Louis. This here's her phone number." Jackal hands me a slip of paper with a name and number on it. "She'll know they're after me and she'll help get me outta here. Use a pay phone just to be sure."

I nod. "I call your sister at this number. What about the key to the locker?"

"Oh, yeah," he says without hesitation. "Here it is. But you keep only five hundred."

"Five hundred," I say.

Then Jackal laughs again. "This wasn't a bad idea, Mooch. Me holin' up here. Yes, sir, old Jackal is going

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to make it. With that money I'll go to Spain. I speak the language some. Jackal ain't so dumb as Curran thinks. I'll come back one day and hit him. That's a promise, Mooch."

"Good for you, Jackal," I say and I go out.

I went straight to the bus depot and opened the locker. There it was, in fives, tens, and twenties, stacked in an imitation-leather brief case. I took it and went outside where I hailed a cab and rode home in style.

The next day I got to work and Elevator Number Five was filled to capacity with grain. Tons and tons of it had poured in from the ship *William Waters*.

"How'd it go, Mac?" I called to the man on board the *Waters*.

"As usual, Mooch," he said. "But damned if I didn't think I heard a voice or something scream out as we started sending grain in. It's spooky at night around here. I don't know how you can stand to work this place alone."

"Well, it won't be much longer now," I said. "Tonight's my last night. I'm quittin'. Maybe take a vacation trip to some place like Rio or Mexico City."

The man on the boat laughed. "Well, good luck, Mooch."

"Thanks," I said.

"We'll be pullin' out first thing in the morning. I guess this grain will be safe for the next three months—that's when it'll be picked up."

"Yeah, I know," I said. I also knew that the late Jackal Hawkes had no idea that Mooch Miller's name used to be Mooch Moroni, and he had a brother named Angie.

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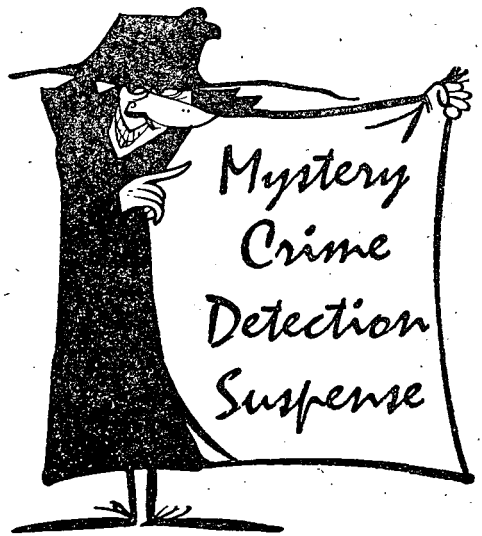

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It is an accurate statement to say that EQMM has published every type, subtype, species, subspecies, variety, subvariety, in the genre and subgenres of the mystery-detective-crime-suspense story—including, to list some, pure puzzle, story of modus operandi, thriller, pseudorealistic, realistic, procedural, inverted, historical, deductive, intuitional, impossible crime, supernatural, preternatural, crook story, spy and counterspy, medical, scientific, Had-I-But-Known, armchair, chase, psychological, psychiatric, legal, literary, hardboiled, softboiled, intellectual, emotional, experimental, parody, pastiche—and, of course, generically speaking, the serious and the humorous of nearly all types.

Now we give you a "reminiscence" of Inspector Letchington Squid, ex-C.I.D., and we can't refrain from asking: Which of the above would you call this *story? (But this is ridiculous!)*

INSPECTOR SQUID'S MOST FAMOUS CASE

by W. R. HOYT

SAGACIOUS OLD INSPECTOR LETchington Squid sat one evening in an elegant London chophouse with a luscious young popsy who reminded him of amorous triumphs buried deep in his past. "You," he said, regarding her with his kindly, crimson eyes, "remind me of amorous triumphs buried deep in my past."

She put small pink fingers to her small pink mouth, and yawned.

"Ah, Paris, 1911!" old "Letch," as he was familiarly known, reminisced.

"Was you in Paris?"

"Was I in Paris!" Inspector Squid winked. His eyelid got stuck momentarily; he unstuck it with a debonair flick of the breadstick he was holding in his left hand. "Actually, no. But they tell me it was a gas. But I've been to lots of other whacked-out places. Like Stockholm. Ah, Stockholm!"

"I've never been there."

"Save your money. Reykjavik's good, though. Loads of laughs. But there's no place like Cicero, Illinois. Now *there* was a detective's paradise."

He inhaled sweet muscatel with a nostalgic sigh, then set his glass down, shaking his head. It continued to shake for quite a while, until he grasped it with both hands and steadied it on his short withered neck.

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She had regarded this with a modicum of interest, the first she had shown since they had entered the place. "Gee," she said, "you really are in lousy shape, aren't you?"

"Not when you consider that I'm seventy-four."

"Are you seventy-four?"

"No, why should I be? I'm sixty-eight. I think. Or is it eighty-six? Not that it makes any difference. You're as young as you feel, and I still feel." Cackling, he stretched out a tentacle toward her knee.

She slapped the tentacle resoundingly. "Watch it, daddy-o. That stuff is out."

"No, it isn't. That stuff will never be out."

"As far as you're concerned, it was out twenty years ago."

He sputtered with laughter, or a fit of coughing, or a heart seizure, or whatever it was: his face went from crimson to purple, and back again, while fluid leaked from every opening in it. When he was able to control himself he gasped, "By golly, you're way off on that, Elizabeth. It *is* Elizabeth, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"It."

"It what?"

"Is."

"Is what?"

"Elizabeth."

"Uh-uh. Jennie."

"Well, whoever you are, finish your muscatel and I'll whistle us up a cab. We'll go to your place and " His left eyelid closed and got stuck again. He tapped it with his breadstick, first nonchalantly, then fretfully—and finally it rolled open.

She said coldly, "You oughta send in for new parts."

"I'm in as good shape as I ever was. But then I never was in good shape. I'm more the mental type . . . Shall I tell you about my most famous case?"

"I'm hungry."

"It occurred in 'seventeen, or was it 'twenty-seven? No, I know, it was the year Margie Bindlebaum and I —but that's another story. I think. Anyway, I was only a lad. I had fiery red hair and a mustache you could have hidden a small dog in. I used to wear snappy check suits and a flower in my buttonhole as big as a purple cabbage. I was the bee's knees, and the girls knew it. I was the Soho Smasher, the Piccadilly Popsicle, the Winchester Wowser, the Lambeth Lambchop, the Buckingham Bronco—say, that's not bad, is it? The Buckingham Bronco."

He nodded and beamed. After a while he stopped beaming, but continued to nod, until a grasp of both hands at his cheeks got things steady again. He took a cigar, jabbed it toward his mouth, but missed, and the cigar sailed over his shoulder.

"Where was I? Oh, yes, I was telling you about my most famous case. It involved a certain Helen Fleegle, a wild young divorcee, who had her eyes on me from the start.

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She said, 'Letchington'—that's my first name, Letchington. What's yours?"

"What's my what?"

"First name."

"Miss Plugg."

"That's a gorgeous name. What was I talking about? Oh, yes, Helen Fleegle. She had her cap set for me, as we used to say at the time. I didn't know what it meant then, but when a woman gets that fire in her eye, things start popping, you know what I mean? She had money. She said, 'Letch, letch—I mean, let's forget everything that happened and start all over.' But that's the end of the story, isn't it?"

"Good."

"No, I mean I haven't told you the beginning yet. I'll back up and start all over. Picture a chateau somewhere out in the tall corn country. Green grass all around, lush trees, frogs, chiggers, all the usual stuff. A gaggle of stone deer on the lawn. She was loaded, as I say. There were two faithful old retainers, Grunnion and his wife, if she *was* his wife."

He stopped and banged himself irritably on the temple with his breadstick. "No, that's not right—that was another famous case, involving old Major Chumley and the poisoned oyster. Which one would you like to hear?"

"I want to eat."

"Have another glass of muscatel."

"You've drunk it all."

"We'll order in a minute. Do you want me to finish this story or don't you?"

Ignoring her reply, he jabbed another cigar at his mouth, this time connecting, struck a lucifer across the tablecloth, and nonchalantly set his white mustache on fire. She watched, mildly interested, as he beat out the flame with the breadstick.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

He rolled his eyes, and snorted. A few scorched black hairs stuck out above his now naked, raw-looking upper lip. The odor of scorched hair rose from him. "This is the damnedest place I've ever eaten at. I'm about to start proceedings against someone, do you know that? They can't treat an ex-inspector of the C.I.D. like this. In my day they unfurled the red carpet when Letchington Squid rolled up in a hansom. The best in the house wasn't good enough. Magnums of the finest muscatel, pig's feet like the gods dine on. What do you get now? Everything's gone down the tubes, nobody knows how to get that snap-crackle-pop into pig's feet any more."

A waiter came by. "Are you ready to order now, sir?"

"Yes. Another bottle of muscatel."

"I want to eat," said the girl.

"Have a breadstick. I was telling you about my most famous case. The chap's name was Sykes, or

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Parmenter, or something like that. Famous all over London for something or other, I forget what. Oh, yes, now it comes back. He was a Colonel in Her Majesty's Royal Fusiliers. Got in a bit of a jam once for kicking a corporal because the beggar had saluted him with a cigar in his mouth. But a more delightful fellow you wouldn't want to meet, unless he was sober. Then, watch out!

"He was drummed out of the Fusiliers on a charge of stealing butter. Went to pieces, he did, and blew his brains out, such as they were. Didn't mean to, actually, he was just making a gesture, don't you know, he was always doing that—putting his Mannlicher to his head, at the Club, crying out that he couldn't stand the shame. But one night some scalawag slipped a bullet into the chamber when poor old Parmenter—or was it Sykes?—thought it was empty, and splutt! Well, there was a stain on the ceiling for months; that was a high ceiling, they didn't have a ladder long enough to reach it.

"A chap named Barsocks—or was it Sykes?—was tried for the crime. His fingerprints were all over the bullet. They hanged him, fair and square. It was open-and-shut, after I found the prints, and he admitted it. Thought it'd be a damnably funny gag on old Sykes—or was it Parmenter?—which of course it was. Maybe the stain's still there. That was the Old Etonians Club, it's still standing. Shall we go over and look at the ceiling, before we go to your apartment?"

"We're not going to my apartment."

"No? Well, we'll see about that." He gave her a sidelong leer, and fell over sidewards, his head dropping of its own weight to the table with a ringing thud that made the glasses dance. He straightened himself groggily. "Is there any blood?"

"Your face is so red you couldn't see it if there was."

"That's a Squid family trait. The blood flames high—we're a passionate clan. We're French, on the Huguenot side, and life is to be lived, don't you know? Our coat of arms wore out, but it used to bear the motto: *'Où est l'action?'* That means, *A kiss is worth a castle.* I've always felt that way, haven't you?"

"I'm hungry."

"Yes, it's getting late. Shall we *departons?"*

"What's that?"

"Cut out."

"I haven't eaten yet."

"Have a breadstick. And another glass of muscatel."

"There isn't any more. You drank it all again."

"Then by all means let me order more. *Garçon, garçon!"*

He made to clap his hands together, but missed, and flung himself out of his chair. The waiter helped him up. "Sir, I believe you have possibly had enough beverage. Would you care to order now?"

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She said, "I'm starving."

He said to the waiter, "Do you know who I am?"

"No, sir."

"Letchington Squid."

"Yes, sir. What would you care to eat?"

"*Inspector* Letchington Squid."

"The filet mignon is very good."

"The filet mignon stinks. Haven't you ever heard of me?"

"I've heard of you since you arrived tonight, sir. Everyone in the restaurant has heard of you since you arrived."

"I hate a smarty-pants."

"May I suggest partridge?"

"I'd like partridge," she said.

"Partridge," said Squid. "Throckmorton Partridge. That reminds me of my most famous case."

She said, "You told me about it."

"No, I didn't."

"You told me about Parmenter or Sykes or whoever blew out his brains at the Old Etonians Club."

"Who is this Parmenter or Sykes or whoever, and what is the Old Etonians Club?"

"The roast squab is recommendable," said the waiter.

She said, "I'd like that."

Squid said to the waiter, "Do you have pig's feet?"

"No, sir. I have normal feet."

"I hate a waiter who's a comic," said Squid. "Particularly I hate a waiter who's a low-comedy comic. What I suggest to you is that you get your own show, and then you can be as low as you please, and your public will adore you. Now, will you stop stepping on my lines and fetch a bottle of muscatel."

The waiter left. Inspector Squid grasped another cigar, but somehow broke it before it reached his mouth. He pitched the halves toward the ashtray, but both halves fell in her wine glass. He said, "Throckmorton Partridge was a stockbroker on the London Exchange, known as the stockbroker's stockbroker to some people, whatever they meant by that. One day he was found dead in his bed, apparently of a stroke. But I had my suspicions of foul play."

"Why did you suspect that?"

"Well, that was my job, don't you know? I mean, if you're in the foul-play business, you have an occupational hangup, you know what I mean?"

"I'm hungry."

"Nothing in this joint is worth eating. There was something about the way that dead stockbroker looked that fairly screamed something or other. In a word, murder. Have a breadstick. His doctor said that he had a history of heart trouble, but I had my doubts. Do you know why?"

The waiter brought the muscatel. Inspector Squid gallantly filled the girl's glass. She regarded the two halves of cigar bobbing about in it without much pleasure. He filled his own glass and promptly emptied it twice. He wheezed, leaked fluid out of his face holes,

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mopped with a napkin, and went on remorselessly: "Because of the earth under his wife's fingernails."

"What are you talking about?"

"Earth under his wife's fingernails."

"What about it?"

"That proved she was gardening." He chomped down on a breadstick and somehow got his teeth, what was left of them, caught in it. He began to strangle. His red face became so violent it looked as if the blood would break through the skin. She regarded him sullenly as he rolled his eyes and clawed the air. The waiter, standing twelve feet away, folded his arms and inspected his fingernails.

A customer passing behind him smote him on the back, and continued on his way. Inspector Squid lay across the table, breathing breadstick crumbs out on the linen.

After a while his face changed from purple to its normal crimson. He straightened himself, coughed hackingly, swallowed a glass of wine, and said, "She went out and gardened after she found the body. Well, that was admirable, don't you know—an Englishman's garden is his garden and all that—but she should have called the police right away. I mean, it all indicated a certain callousness. So one thought led to another, and I began to wonder if the blue circles that showed on Partridge's throat might not have significance. In a word, it came to me that she could well have throttled the blighter while he was sleeping."

The waiter suddenly appeared at his shoulder, hissing like a snake: "I've talked to the maitre d'. He advises me to advise you that if you do not leave at once, you will be forcibly ejected."

The girl said, "I haven't even ordered yet."

Inspector Squid slashed at the waiter with his breadstick. The waiter sprang back. Squid flung it at him and caught him on the bridge of the nose. The waiter, tears sprouting from his eyes, retreated.

Squid said, "The body lay on the bed, head on the pillow. I went out and came back with a rubber balloon on a long rubber tube, with a ball at the other end of it, don't you know, which, when you squeezed it, inflated the balloon. I slipped the balloon under the pillow, ran the tube under the bedclothes to the foot of the bed, and placed the ball in my pocket with my hand around it. The room was dim. I called, 'Mrs. Partridge! Come at once! I think he's still alive!' "

He poured the last of the bottle of muscatel into his glass and threw most of it, or at least half of it, into his mouth. Wiping his chin with a breadstick, he resumed, "She came running. She stared at him. At that moment I started to squeeze the rubber ball. There came the strangest sighing sound. I glanced at her. Her face was white as parchment, whatever parchment is. It was as if

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the blighter was breathing. Then, as the balloon under the pillow began to fill, his head began to lift. The sighing sound went on. I kept pumping the balloon, then suddenly stopped. The head subsided on the pillow, with the longest, saddest whistling sigh you ever heard in your life."

He paused dramatically, staring at her. Her eyes were glazed.

"What do you think I did then?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Since you ask me, I'll tell you what I did. I slipped the rubber ball out of my pocket, dropped it on the rug. I cried, 'He's alive, he's alive! Stay with him! I'll call the doctor!' Then I raced out of the room, made a great pounding down the hall, and sneaked back. I peered into the room.

"She was kneeling on top of that corpse, both hands wrapped around his neck, squeezing with all her might. I heard her pant, 'Throckmorton Partridge, you son of a witch, how many times do I have to strangle you before you stay dead?'"

Inspector Squid paused and lifted the wine glass to his lips. He set it down. "Who drank this?"

"You did."

"Damned if I did." He shook the empty bottle. "I think that rat shorted me. You drinking yours?"

"Not with your cigar floating around in it."

He pulled it close, fished the cigar halves out, dropped them on the table, and drank. "That was my most famous case."

"I'm hungry."

"Unfortunately she was set free. When I told the court of my ruse, her lawyer said that it was no crime to strangle a dead man. Not in the best taste, he admitted, but no real harm in it. The jury agreed."

"How about the blue circles on his neck?"

"I don't know anything about blue circles; all I know is that she was a smasher, what we used to call a Snazzy McNazzy. I mean, there wasn't a chance for conviction when that all-man jury got a load of her legs. But I still say it's my most famous case. That is, unless you consider what I like to call the Case of the Demented Duck."

"I don't want to hear about any of your stupid cases. I just want dinner. I haven't had anything."

"Have a breadstick."

"I don't want a breadstick."

"Tell you what: let's get some chop suey and take it up to your place."

"No."

"The food here is garbage."

"Why did you bring me here, then?"

"Because they have the best muscatel cellar in the Kingdom, not that there's much left of the Kingdom. *Garçon, garçon!* Hey, Ratface! Another bottle! And you, my dear, sit back, and I'll tell you my most famous case—the Case of the Demented Duck . . ."

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a *NEW* crime story by

CHRISTIANNA BRAND

One might almost say that Christianna Brand specializes in the "unusual." Sometimes her stories are traditional in form and technique—but never without ingenuity and freshness either in manner or material, or in both; but sometimes her stories are not at all traditional—witness this decidedly offbeat tale about blackmail, as nasty and shocking and dirty a business as the glossy pictures behind it all . . .

THE SKIPPING GAME

by CHRISTIANNA BRAND

LINDA HARTLEY WAS SKIPPING ROPE with the Bindell twins, singing to a well-known tune a verse of their own improvisation; it was a game at which Joy and Roy Bindell were, through long practice, past masters.

"One, two, three, and four,"
chirped Joy,
"Father locks the office door.
Five, six, seven, eight,
He pretends he's working late."

She tripped over the rope and Roy leaped in.

"Nine, ten, eleven, twelve,
He's not working by himself!"

All three stopped skipping and burst into giggles. Joy took the rope and skipped by herself, changing the theme.

"Pig, dog, cat, and cow
Mother knows and what a row!
Horse, goat, rat, and boar—
I was listening at the door."

Linda was not so accomplished as the twins but she took the rope and had a go at it:

"Sun, moon, day, and night
My parents also had a fight."

But she gave up and resorted to prose. "My mother said my father has got to make *your* father make *your* mother get me into Hallfield."

Hallfield was the posh girls' school of Linda's aspirations; Joy was going there for the summer term. Mrs. Bindell was on the Board of Governors, and since she disapproved of Linda and looked down on the girl's mother, she was only too likely to oppose Linda's admission.

"Stove, grate, fire, and hob," sang Linda, skipping again, "Your mother is an awful snob."

"Awful," agreed the twins, not

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singing. It must be ghastly for poor Linda, her father having married so far beneath him.

That Harold Hartley had married beneath him was acknowledged by one and all, not excluding Mrs. Hartley and himself. That he'd had much the better of the bargain, occurred to none of them. Not that he was unkind to Louisa—not particularly; but he had always been a difficult, disagreeable man and of late had grown quite impossibly irritable—so ill-tempered and nervous and—suspicious; neurotic, Louisa supposed would be the word for it.

He had even dug out an old wartime, smuggled-home revolver and kept it loaded in a drawer beside his bed. A nasty, black, ugly thing—she wouldn't so much as touch it herself—but it seemed to give him confidence. At times she wondered if he were the victim of some kind of blackmail—there was some oddly secretive visiting, now and then. Well, if that were so, she could only pray that it would continue—there seemed enough money to spare, and it was worth paying anything to prevent any smear of scandal from interrupting the triumphant progress through life of her Linda.

Linda was their "only"—a horrid child, really, but to the loving and simple heart of her mother, the very pink of perfection in brains and in beauty. For Linda alone did she resent the social rebuffs of snobbish little Sanstone—led by Mrs. Bindell, the solicitor's wife.

Why Mrs. Bindell should be so positively inimical toward her, she never could quite understand; that she resented the bosom friendship of the twins with Linda was evident. To effect a separation, Louisa strongly suspected, Mrs. Bindell would certainly oppose Linda's admission to the new school. However, Harold must cope with that; Harold saw a good deal of Mr. Bindell over those property deals of his, and he would fix it...

But alas, in gray December, Harold, in Louisa's own phrase, took ill and was about to die.

She sat with Mrs. Bindell in "the lounge" while Mr. Bindell went up to the sickroom. "Though it's not much use him going, Mrs. Bindell. It's days since poor Harold could speak a word, let alone be understood; nor hold a pencil to write, or even make signs."

"It is usual to call and inquire," said Mrs. Bindell, loftily, putting common little Mrs. Hartley in her place.

But Louisa, it seemed, had been right after all. Harold had been unable to say a single word to Mr. Bindell. "But he does seem to be trying to ask me something, Mrs. Hartley—something he wants me to find for him or something like that. Do you know what it could be?"

"No, I don't," said Louisa. "We know about his will and all that. Something to do with the office, perhaps?"

"I'll go along there," suggested

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Mr. Bindell, "and get them to let me look around."

But acording to the office underlings nothing was found that could account for Mr. Hartley's anxieties; and when Louisa herself tried to question him, he rolled his head on the pillow and his look said as plainly as it had many times before during their life together, "Mind your own business, Louisa, and leave me alone."

And the days passed away and so at last did Harold; and at the Sanstone Crematorium ashes to ashes returned, and that was the end of *him*.

Mr. Bindell waited a decent interval—a fortnight, he evidently considered sufficient—and then called on the widow, this time without his lady. Linda had gone to the movies with the twins. "So may I take it, Mrs. Hartley, that we are alone in the house?"

"Well, yes," said Louisa, startled. Was Mr. Bindell going to leap on her with improper proposals now that Harold was out of the way? She had always thought he had a nasty look.

But Mr. Bindell did not leap. Instead he reached into his brief case and brought out a large envelope. "You remember that your husband was trying to tell me something before he died? Trying to ask me to find something for him?"

"Yes, I remember," said Louisa. "Did you find it? What was it?"

Mr. Bindell selected from the envelope a single item—a photograph on glossy paper. He allowed Louisa one brief glance at it and then returned it to its envelope. "A collection of pornography," he said, and added, "The most lurid I've ever seen."

Louisa thought, from her one glimpse, that this was probably so. "*Harold* had this filth?"

"In the private drawer of his safe at the office. Of course when I saw what it was I concealed it from his staff." He snapped a rubber band round the envelope. "No wonder he didn't want it found."

"No wonder," agreed Louisa, and thought of the gossip spreading out in widening circles of ever more unsavory scandal—nasty, dirty, salacious scandal, touched with that odd malice that, in so many quarters, Harold had seemed to attract. "Well, thank goodness, Mr. Bindell, it was you who found it. And thank you very much for bringing it to me."

Privately she thought he might just as well have thrown the whole lot in the fire and not disturbed her in her widowhood; but he wanted thanks and appreciation, no doubt.

Mr. Bindell, however, wanted more than that and made very little bones about it. "Money is tight these days, Mrs. Hartley. My wife likes to keep up a—good establishment; and we have two children yet to educate. I know Hartley left you pretty well off, and you've only the one girl."

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She sat with her hands in her lap, very still. She had been right, then, about there being a blackmailer. Only—Mr. Bindell! Mr. Bindell, the upright, respectable solicitor; and Mrs. Bindell, giving herself such airs!

She said at last, "How can you prove positively they were his? They might be anyone's—you might even have got them yourself for this very purpose."

No fool, after all, Mrs. Hartley! Mr. Bindell reflected that these simple people had often very direct and rational minds. But he had been ready for it. "You saw what a glossy print it was? He would no doubt pore over the stuff—gloating over it, you know. The whole lot will be covered with his fingerprints."

"I see," said Louisa. "So—?"

"One word from me in my position—one whisper going the rounds at a Rotary luncheon, one anecdote confided in a pub when we've all had a drop too much . . . Not nice for a young daughter, Mrs. Hartley, growing up in a small town like this."

"No," said Louisa, very white. She wasted no more words. "How much?"

"There are sixteen of them. Say one thousand pounds each. And you buy them outright—no hangovers. But one by one," said Mr. Bindell. "One by one. I can't have you selling out sixteen thousand pounds' worth of stock and being unable to account, frankly and openly, for the sale. And who knows?—in time values in the pornographic market may rise."

She did not haggle; she acquiesced at once. He might have been alerted by that, but he was not; he knew her simple soul and that in it there was room for nothing but her precious Linda. And over the next year or two she could find the money easily enough; it wasn't worth her putting up a fight.

"Next Monday evening, then, at my office? Half-past six, by the side door—I'll leave it ajar—after the staff has gone home. I often stay on and work late."

"I'll come if it's raining," she said. "If it isn't, I'll come the first rainy evening after that."

"Raining?"

"I'd better not be seen, Mr. Bindell, making regular visits to your office after hours. And there's no disguise like an umbrella, is there?"

Shrewd, very shrewd, and quick off the mark with it too. "But unnecessary," he said. "It's all offices round there—never a soul about in the evenings."

"There'll be even fewer about," she said, "if it's wet outside."

And on Monday it was wet; and she took him £1000 and four weeks later another £1000—hurrying through the deserted streets, head down against the driving rain, wearing a long belted mackintosh, and with her umbrella up.

They wasted no time. He would leave the door open and be waiting

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at his desk, a few papers scattered there relating to Harold Hartley's affairs, just in case they should be disturbed. And she would slip in and go up to his room on the first floor and hand over the small envelope with the banknotes in it and wait, unaffronted, while he counted them. And he would hold out the large envelope containing the pictures and allow her to select one—she did it steadily, not averting her eyes, though her cheeks would first go pale and then flush deeply—and tuck the selected picture into the big handbag she was careful to take with her; and then, with hardly a word spoken, she would leave.

And meanwhile at home she swept and cleaned and polished as though—as though, now that Harold was gone, she would sweep and clean and polish away every touch, almost every memory, of his past presence there. The only thing she did not polish, did not even touch, was the ugly black revolver in the bedside drawer.

But on the third occasion of paying the blackmail she took the revolver out of the drawer, wrapping it in a silk scarf, and put it in her large handbag. And this time she took no money with her.

She had thought it all out very carefully, reducing it to its simplest elements. Now she carried no open umbrella but clutched about her head and face a plastic "pixie-hood"; and she had pulled up the long mackintosh by its belt so that the skirt came hardly down to her knees, and scuttled along with a wibble-wobbling gait on her highest high heels.

In the hall of the office building she took off the mackintosh, slipped over her head a large plastic bag in which she had cut a hole for her face and another for her rubber-gloved right hand. So attired and holding the revolver, she walked without flurry up the stairs to Mr. Bindell's room.

He went white when he saw the gun, whiter still when he took in the significance of the plastic covering. He stammered, "For God's sake! Don't shoot! Take them, take the whole lot—I'll never tell a soul, I swear it!"

"Not even an anecdote in a pub?" she said, quoting, "when you've all had a drop too much."

And she pointed the gun at the left side of his chest and giving herself no time to think, pulled the trigger. It was stiffer than she'd expected and for a moment the whole thing seemed strong and alive in her hand; and there was more noise than she'd expected—Harold had told her that the gun was fitted with a silencer and she'd rather relied on that.

But at any rate, it did its work. At that range it could hardly fail—and Mr. Bindell who had been unpleasant enough in life, was now even more unpleasant in death.

She put the revolver on the desk, stripped off the rubber glove and

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the splattered plastic. A gun, its origins untraceable—fingerprints on it of a man unknown, who could never now be known, for his fingers, prints and all, were to ashes returned and in her well-polished home no trace of him remained. But a *man's* fingerprints, that was the point—not a woman's. And a common, household, rubber glove, worn over a regular glove—first, to obviate fingerprints inside the rubber, and second, to allow for a size that a man might have worn. And a plastic bag, never touched by her own fingers . . . And nothing in the world—for Mr. Bindell himself had been the careful one, the secretive one—to connect her with him: not, at any rate, from the lethal point of view.

She had brought with her a large envelope, addressed to herself at home, and already stamped. Into this she put the envelope containing the photographs. In the hall she put on her mackintosh again, belted it up very short, and on her high-heeled shoes, wibble-wobbled out of the side door and into the rain.

She had marked a convenient mailbox between her home and the office. She now returned to it and there posted the envelope; in a dark corner behind the box she let down the mackintosh to its full length, took off the plastic hood, dried it carefully and rolled it away in its little plastic case. The handbag had been chosen, long in advance, to accommodate a folding umbrella.

In her own image again, without furtiveness and certainly without the wibble-wobble, she went back to Mr. Bindell's office, tried the front door, put on a puzzled air, went round to the side at last—went in, shaking out the wet umbrella, called up the stairs, mounted to Mr. Bindell's door, shrieked like any startled woman on seeing a bloodstained figure sprawled across a desk, ran to him, made such futile attempts as anyone might make to do something, anything . . . pushed aside the horrid black gun, picked up the plastic with fastidious fingers and quickly dropped it again; at last picked up the telephone . . .

("Well, I may just have touched things—if there are any fingerprints on them, then I must have, but I was so shocked I hardly knew what I was doing. And blood, yes, there may well be blood on me, on my clothes—but I did try to lift his head, I did handle the blood-spattered telephone.")

Meanwhile, however, she contented herself with dialing the police. "Do please come quickly! It's dreadful! Yes, Mr. Bindell—you know, the solicitor. Yes, I came to see him on business—the papers are right here on his desk; he said to drop in any time, he'd be working late . . ."

The investigation took simply ages. It was not for several months that widowed Mrs. Hartley felt the

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time ripe to call on widowed Mrs. Bindell. "I thought I should have a word with you about Linda's acceptance to Hallfield School."

"That matter comes up before the Board on Tuesday," said Mrs. Bindell—by this time well back in harness.

"Then Linda will start when Joy does next term," said Louisa; and it was a flat statement.

"*If* we decide to admit her," said Mrs. Bindell.

"I think you'll decide to admit her all right," said Louisa. She produced a large envelope and slid out a couple of glossy black-and-white prints. "Disgusting, aren't they?"

"Where on earth—?" cried Mrs. Bindell, absolutely shocked.

"That night I found your husband dead . . ." said Louisa. "I told the police I hardly touched anything in his office, Mrs. Bindell, but that wasn't quite true. He had evidently been taken by surprise when the murderer came; this—this filth—was spread out over the blotter in front of him."

Mrs. Bindell opened her mouth as though to speak but shut it again.

"I happened to have a large handbag and I gathered the awful things up and brought them away with me. I thought," said Louisa limpidly, "that you wouldn't care for them to be found in your husband's office by anyone else. No one wants a scandal, and you with all the work you do in this town—Board of Governors at Hallfield, for example—you'd be particularly susceptible, wouldn't you?"

Mrs. Bindell tried again to speak, and again remained silent.

"You're going to suggest, perhaps," said Louisa, "that I can't prove the pictures were actually his. But these people—well, they pore over this kind of stuff, gloating over it, so I've been told; so this glossy paper will be covered with his fingerprints."

Mrs. Bindell seemed to think about it, sitting in a saggy heap, all the bounce and arrogance gone from her. She said at last, arriving with surprising quickness on the whole at the proper conclusion, "How much shall I have to pay?"

Louisa had handed over £2000 to Mr. Bindell. Say another £1000 for pain and stress, not to mention what might, she supposed, be called "danger money."

"I'll take three thousand down," she said. "That's to settle—well, a kind of debt. And then of course there's the matter of Linda getting in at Hallfield. After that—" She shrugged. "I'm not hard up, Mrs. Bindell; financially I shall be quite safe—now. So it won't be a matter of cash. Just as long as my Linda gets along happily and successfully in Sanstone—you have so much influence here. Of course, the right school will help and then she and Joy might take some courses together, modeling or whatever it is they'll have set their hearts on by then; and then knowing the right

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people helps too and going to all the parties . . ."

She returned the envelope to her bag. "The secret will be safe with me," Louisa said. "*I* don't go to Rotary luncheons or get drunk in pubs." And she fastened the bag with a snap and got up to leave. "Monday afternoon perhaps? You could drop the money in at my house—when you call to invite me to run a stall at Lady Graves's bazaar. I've never been asked even to help there; and though to be honest I don't think I've missed much, still, everybody else goes and I'd like to meet Lady Graves. I believe her children are charming, and the boy is about three years older than my Linda . . . One never knows, does one?" She thought it over for a moment, puzzled. "Now, what exactly would the boy's title be?"

"The Honorable," said Mrs. Bindell, dull-voiced.

"It will be a great help," said Louisa, "having you to help me over little things like that."

Linda and Joy were skipping again. Roy joined them, breathless, and seized the rope. He addressed his song to Linda.

"Cod, skate, sturgeon, shark—
Your mother's on the blackmail lark!
Whale, walrus, and sea cow—
She's got the feelthy peectures now!"

"*No!*" said Linda.

"Yes," said Roy. He went on.

"Sea, lake, river, pool—
So you're going to Hallfield School."

"*No!*" cried Linda and Joy, together this time, excitedly.

"Yes, you are, and what's more," said Roy, skipping again—

"Men and horses, hare and hounds—
You're going to have three thousand pounds,
And go around with Joy and me
And marry aristocracy."

He stopped skipping and they all rolled with laughter, hugging one another triumphantly.

"Well, honestly, can you believe it?" said Linda, when at last they stopped, exhausted. "Grown*ups!*"

"What a flap if any of us so much as cheats a bit at school!"

"I suppose this means that it really was my mother who shot your father?"

"Of course it was," said Roy. "She knew these floozies had been going to his office after hours—all Sanstone knew it. The police thought some boy friend or father or someone had been watching and went in and did for him. Of course *they* knew nothing about the blackmail."

He exchanged a suddenly exultant glance with his sister. It might some day be profitable to be the only ones in the world who knew that Mrs. Hartley was a murderess.

Linda saw nothing of the glance. "It's jolly decent of you to take it like this."

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"Oh, well, we didn't like him very much, did we, Roy?"

"We don't like any grownups very much," said Roy.

"And I must say," Linda remarked, "considering that he was blackmailing her with the Feelthy Peectures after my father died, he jolly well deserved everything he got."

"M'm. On the other hand," said Roy, "*your* father had been blackmailing *our* father with them for years. So it was really only tit for tat."

And Roy caught up one end of the rope and Joy caught up the other end and Linda flew into the middle; and as they turned and skipped, all three gaily sang:

"Tit for tat and knick for knack—
The biter bit the biter back.
Hound hunts fox and fox hunts hound—
Oh, what a merry merry-go-round!"

NEXT MONTH...

Jeff and Haila Troy in a detective *SHORT NOVEL*—complete

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Winner of a* SECOND PRIZE *in the* MWA *contest

JOE GORES

It was an unusual case for Daniel Kearny Associates of San Francisco. First, it was on a contingent basis—and that was almost unheard of. Second, it was an old embezzlement—old enough to be a cold trail. Third, the victim didn't want anyone to know—and whoever heard of anything like that? . . . Another realistic procedural that rings true in every syllable—fiction with "suspension of disbelief," with the documentary impact of it-actually-happened . . .

FILE #3: THE PEDRETTI CASE

by JOE GORES

FRIDAY, February 28, 6:06 p.m. —— Field agents at Daniel Kearny Associates of San Francisco, who had been working fifteen-hour days as they did at the end of every month, could now begin to relax. Patrick Michael O'Bannon had come with Kearny from Walters Auto Detectives seven years before; now he was reminiscing, his feet propped on the edge of Kearny's desk, a glass of bourbon in hand, his freckles magnificent, hair blazing, blue eyes bubbling.

"Dan, remember that time we spotted that Lincoln Continen—"

Kearny's intercom buzzed; he winked at O'B and picked up. Even relaxed over a drink he looked aggressively tough, a little older than O'Bannon's 41, with a slightly flattened nose, a massive jaw, and gray eyes cold enough to chill bone marrow. In a fair imitation of O'Bannon's voice he said, "Kearny left five minutes ago."

Kathy Onoda, upstairs in clerical, just snorted. She was the DKA office manager, had formerly been Kearny's secretary: a Japanese girl in her late twenties with classically Oriental features.

"You're a scream, Dan. I'm sending a Nate Bemel down; he wants to hire us, contingent basis, on a small lithography firm embezzlement."

Kearny snubbed out his cigarette, suddenly getting serious. "*Contingent* basis? Kathy, you know better than that."

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"He's on his way down," she repeated musically. " 'Bye."

Kearny cursed and swiveled back to his desk. His office was in the basement of the converted Victorian ex-bawdy house which now was DKA, tucked away among the field agents' cubbyholes and equipped with a one-way plate-glass door. He waved O'Bannon back to his seat.

"Sit in, O'B. Man wants to hire us on a contingent basis."

"Why'd Kathy even bother to send him down? No payee, no workee."

"That's what I want to find out."

Nate Bemel proved to be a beefy man in his mid-fifties with luxurious curling black hair, a gentle face, and a huge nose.

"I'd better tell you right away, Mr. Bemel, that we normally take contingent assignments only from large financial institutions," said Kearny. "Frankly, I'm a little puzzled *why* Miss Onoda sent you—"

"Down to see you?" Bemel's voice was so guttural that his English sounded almost like a foreign language. "You see, I own North Beach Litho and I got a very special sort of problem on this embezzlement."

"How much was taken?"

"Sixteen thousand, four hundred and seventy-two dollars."

O'B gave a silent whistle. "The embezzler was your bookkeeper?"

"Yes. Arnaldo Pedretti. But how do *you* know that?"

"By the size of the embezzlement," said Kearny, "he probably was coffee-canning it for months. Unless the bookkeeper was involved, he would have caught the shortages on routine audit."

Bemel nodded. "Arnaldo doesn't come to work one Monday; then I find that for six months he's been depositing only enough clients' checks to cover running expenses. The Friday before, he'd cashed all those other checks he'd been holding out and left with the money."

"When did this happen?" asked O'Bannon.

"May thirtieth. A Friday, like I said. Just nine months ago."

Kearny jerked as if a cigarette had been laid against his spine. "Nine *months* ago and you're just coming around now? The bonding comp—"

"I ain't moved against his bond." Bemel's voice saddened. "I told you —special problem. Arnaldo Pedretti is my brother-in-law."

All was suddenly clear to O'Bannon: his wife, too, was Italian. Italian wives meant Italian families. "Your mother-in-law, Mr. Bemel?"

His sadness deepened. "Seventy-four years old, gentlemen; in the Chinese New Year parade she should be the dragon, already. My Rosa says, 'Listen to Mama.' For nine months I listen." He sat up sternly. "He doesn't come back. All that money he steals, it isn't right. I want you should find him. For this, you keep half of what you recover."

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Kearny lit another cigarette. Finding Pedretti would be something all right, as would half of sixteen thousand—if any of it was left. He said, "You want this undercover? Even from the family?"

Bemel bounced in his chair. "Especially from the family. Not even my wife Rosa should know. No charges against him—just my money back I want."

"We'll give it one week without retainer, Mr. Bemel. Miss Onoda will have questions and a paper for you to sign—"

"A paper I don't sign," he exclaimed. "If my wife Rosa—"

But five minutes later, assured his wife would never find out, Bemel departed for the clerical offices overhead. Kearny smeared out his cigarette. O'B, catching his eye, suddenly held up a hand palm out, like a traffic cop.

"Not *me,* Dan! I've got two flooring checks and that skip—"

"Just until next weekend, O'B," he said airily. "You're always slow the first part of the month anyway."

"That's because I'm so fast the *end* of the month," O'B said.

Monday. ——— O'B parked on Vallejo Street in North Beach, two blocks from the apartments where the client and Rosa had the upper, Mama Pedretti—and formerly the subject—the lower. O'B reflected sourly on the two pitchers of martinis he'd downed the night before; and now *this* mickey-mouse.

Arnaldo Pedretti, 38, white, single, last known R/A, 784 Vallejo; last known B/A, North Beach Litho, 652 Vallejo. Period. No further given information. Automobile? None. Driver's license? Yes. O'B wrote *renewal date?* behind that item on the case sheet. Booze? Bemel hadn't known if, where, or with whom. O'B brightened: at least he could get a drink on expense account. Women? Only one known was Agnese Versaggi, daughter of an old friend of Mama Pedretti's, who worked at the bank where Bemel kept his account. Probably carried a rosary when she went out on a date.

There was a snapshot of Pedretti, too. Five feet seven, sallow, with his belly over his belt. Black, curly, badly receding hair, heavy horn-rim glasses. A magnificently unhappy-looking man.

O'B locked his car, walked down to Emery Lane, and cut through to the back entrance of Bank of America, Columbus Branch. He sauntered about until he found Agnese Versaggi's Paying and Receiving window. Unlike Pedretti, she had Anglicized her given name to Agnes. A big girl about 30, nearly voluptuous under a no-nonsense wool suit. Heavy-boned face, wide mouth that smiled easily, big teeth, black hair pulled back carelessly on either side of her face, dark expressive eyes.

O'B returned through the alley to Vallejo Street and selected a small

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mid-block tavern. A few old Italian gents were drinking red wine at the bar. O'Bannon ordered a beer.

"At least *this* neighborhood hasn't changed much," he remarked.

"You seen the joint down the block? Poetry readings every Tuesday, crazy designs all over the windows, every color you can think of?"

O'Bannon shrugged. "That's just the beats."

"They call themselves hippies now. How long you been away?"

"Since sixty-one—engineering job overseas." He paused. "Say, you know a guy named Arnie Pedretti used to live around here?"

"Pedretti? Sure. But he ain't been around for—oh, hell, must be almost a year now. Took a job out of state, his sister said."

"He used to do his drinking here?"

"You kidding? Some joint down on Bay where old Mama Pedretti wouldn't have no spies—Devlin's Dublin Pub. Member of Roma Athletic Club on Stockton, too, but that's just a gymnasium."

In succession O'B hit three more bars, a hotel, a garage, a wine company, and a dry cleaner. He got one vaguely interesting item at the garage: the subject had been hung up on sports cars.

Driving down to Devlin's, he stopped at the Roma Athletic Club to learn only that the subject had played handball, very badly, and had pitched softball, quite well, for a team sponsored by a local Italian mortician. Devlin's, however, while producing only that the subject and a black-haired gal half a foot taller than he had dropped in occasionally, proved so interesting that O'B remained until five o'clock.

At 5:12, quite tipsy, he was waiting when Agnes Versaggi emerged from the bank and crossed with the light in long strides. Like many big women, she had very shapely legs.

"Miss Versaggi? I'd like to talk to you about Arnaldo Pedretti."

She flashed an unexpected smile and said, "I know a good place on Union that won't be crowded yet. If you're buying."

Making an instant decision, O'B said, "I'm on expense account."

"I thought you were."

She downed her first martini with such ease that O'B abandoned all thought that she carried a rosary on dates.

"I've been expecting someone from the bonding company," she said, "ever since Arnie cashed those checks." Which explained who she thought O'B was. "Mama Pedretti always hoped we'd get married, but me, I knew that what I got, Arnie doesn't need. If you've lived here long—"

"Born in the Mission district."

"So you know about Italian mamas, eh? Mama Pedretti ran Arnie's life. They lived in the same apartment, went to Peter and Paul's together on Sunday—even, she insisted, 'Arnaldo' instead of Arnold.

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Thirty-eight years old and afraid to drink in a neighborhood bar."

"Devlin's Dublin Pub?" prompted O'Bannon.

"I used to go there with him sometimes; he went for big women, like me. Then that Friday, at the bank, he goes to another window. Always he comes to my window; so after he leaves I check up on him. Sixteen thousand dollars worth of checks he cashed—and didn't deposit. I know what he's doing, but—what's to say? He's got power of attorney, eh? And it is maybe his last chance to get away from Mama."

Then she added darkly, "Maybe he *never* gets away from the family, eh? Even now, seven thirty at night each first Friday of the month when Mama's away at Stations of the Cross in the cathedral —he calls his sister."

"He calls Mrs. Bemel?" O'B asked sharply.

"Sure. Rosie." She gave a sudden martini giggle. "But you don't tell her I said so, eh? She doesn't know that I know."

"Our little secret," agreed O'B gravely.

It came out so much like "Sheecret" that he decided he'd better get something to eat. But he got this excellent idea much too late. He woke up at six thirty the next morning parked in front of the DKA office, with a mouth like a mill-hand's undershirt and no recollection of how he had got there. Probably ate some gnocchi at that Italian place that disagreed with him, he decided safely: then he spent two hours in a Turkish bath and returned at a virtuous nine o'clock.

TUESDAY. ——— Giselle Mark was a long, lean, morally upright but wicked-looking blonde in her early twenties. She had started with DKA as a part-time file girl while in college, and had gone in mortal terror of O'Bannon's winks, leers, and blatant propositions until she had realized that his weakness was liquor. Now they were close friends; and she knew that he was the firm's best investigator apart from Kearny himself.

As O'B dialed Searching Registration Service in Sacramento, Giselle said lumpily into her own phone, "My name is Mrs. Angelo Pedretti and I want the service representative for phone number 363-9810."

"Yes, Mrs. Pedretti, may we help you?"

Giselle explained in the limping accent she'd chosen for Mama Pedretti that her income tax consultant needed all available information on her long-distance calls since the previous June. The voice went icy in contemplation of the possible work involved, but finally said, "If you would hold the line, please, I'll try and get that information for you."

O'B hung up, and Giselle covered her mouthpiece. "She's buying

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it. Anything from S.R.S. on his license or a possible car purchase?"

"They'll check Department of Motor Vehicle files and call us."

Giselle removed her hand quickly. "Yes? I see." She began writing. "Just the one each month and . . . yes. Thank you. That should be all the accountant needs." She said to O'B, "Collect calls came from an Arnold Payne—bound to be Arnaldo Pedretti—in June, July, August, September, and October, each from a different city—"

"And from October on, all calls from Santa Rosa." O'B was reading over her shoulder. "Each from a different phone." He hid a yawn with a freckled fist. "Confirm that they'll all be pay phones, will you, doll? Also check Santa Rosa for a phone listing in either name—though I doubt he's that dumb—and find out if the calls came on the first Friday of each month. I've got a couple of hot field leads—"

"Sure you do. Have a good sleep, you fink," said Giselle.

WEDNESDAY. ——— O'Bannon screwed up his leathery face and began reading Giselle's memo. If he hadn't got loaded Monday night and had to spend yesterday recuperating—but to hell with it. O'B was not introspective; few detectives are. Soul searchers are not good at raking over the rubbish heaps in other human lives.

As O'B had expected, all the calls had come from pay phones, and all the calls had been made on the first Friday of the month.

June 5: Eureka, up in the north coast redwood country.

July 3: Marysville, moving south.

August 7: Napa, in the wine country.

September 4: Vallejo, 40 miles northeast of the city across the Carquinez Straights.

October 2: the jump to Santa Rosa, due north of San Francisco in Sonoma County.

Where was the pattern? If Payne *were* Pedretti, wouldn't he find better places to live it up on his stolen sixteen thou than a series of small towns?

He buzzed Giselle. "Anything from S.R.S. in Sacramento yet?"

"Negative on a driver's license renewal. They'll call back on the auto registration file check as soon as they complete it."

He then called the client at North Beach Litho. When Nate Bemel's thick accent was in his ear he said, "This is O'Bannon at DKA. I've got a couple of questions. How late do you work on Fridays?"

"Fridays? Home for supper, back here until eight o'clock."

That checked. He said, "I know the phone in your apartment is in Mama Pedretti's name, but who actually pays the bill?"

"You investigating me or—you know who? *I* pay the bill."

"But who *physically* pays it? Writes the check, say?"

"Well, Rosa pays all the house-

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hold bills. I think she takes the phone bill down to Bank of America and then pays it in cash."

O'B thanked him and hung up. The collect calls made sense now. Only Rosa saw the items on the phone bill. When the call came, she could refuse it if someone else was in the apartment with her. Being sociable, she would go to Agnes Versaggi's window at the bank; Agnes would not have been fooled by Arnold Payne/ Arnaldo Pedretti for a minute. But O'B was still no closer to the subject, since it was obvious that Rosa didn't know how to reach him.

Giselle buzzed on the intercom. "S.R.S. just called, O'B. Last September an Arnold Payne bought an XKE-120 Jaguar from a Vallejo dealer. The title slip was mailed in October to—" Her voice fell. "Mailed to Post Office Box 281 in Redwood City. Which is on the Peninsula thirty miles *south* of here, while the phone calls put our—"

"—our Arnold Payne in Santa Rosa, forty miles *north*. Right. How about this, Giselle: he's got a traveling sales job and the box number is his home office address?"

"Selling from a *Jaguar*, O'B? And what about Social Security, Federal withholding taxes, bonding, employment references—"

"Yeah." O'B arched an eyebrow; an idea had come to him. He said, "I'll try to pop that P.O. box, doll. There's *one* possibility—"

The telephone is the skiptracer's most potent tool. O'Bannon in person, without elaborate disguises, was a red-headed Irishman with a hard-bitten face. But O'B on the phone could be anyone from a teen-ager to an octogenarian. For this call he was a truck driver.

"Ah, yeah, say, I'm out here off the Bayshore Freeway on Marsh Road. Got twelve thousand board feet of redwood one-by-six addressed to an Arnold Payne at P.O. Box 281." He paused for dramatic effect. *"Where do you want 'em?"* he asked the post office employee.

"Listen," the clerk squeaked, "that isn't mail! You can't bring—"

"Look, mister," said O'Bannon's truck-driver voice, "I picked up this load from the Sequoia Mills in Eureka last night; you're silly as hell if you think I'm just gonna dead-haul it back up there again."

"Just a minute." The postal clerk went away. This was the crucial moment, since by law the addresses of box holders are not to be given out. The man returned. "Yeah. Haney's Combined Shows, 3951 Edison Way, Redwood City."

O'B had guessed right—a traveling road show. Few carny laborers paid social security or even filed W-2 forms. And the little carnivals worked a swing of small-town fairs, livestock shows, and rodeos.

Giselle had an objection. "That's great, but it looks like he left it back in October to stay in Santa Rosa, doesn't it?"

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"There's only one way to find out."

Forty minutes later O'B parked his car alongside a small brick building on Edison Way in Redwood City. It was a hot clear day on the Peninsula, very different from the city's March bluster. He locked his topcoat in the car and entered a door marked *C. V. Baggett, General Agent.* Behind a counter was a well-corseted woman with ruthlessly peroxided hair and a face from which time had wrung the milk of human kindness.

O'B gestured at the empty inner office. "Mr. Baggett?"

"Lunch!" The word exploded like a bullet. "I'm Madame George."

"Mr. Baggett *does* represent Haney's Combined Shows?"

"Also Phantasy Phun Phairs." She indicated a garish poster. "I was with Phantasy for twenty years before Haney took over, and twenty after that. Finally told C.V. that I wanted to sleep in a house without wheels on it, so he had me take over running the office here."

"I saw one of your carnivals in Vallejo last year, and—"

"August. Phantasy One. I was managing it then. The Phantasys are truck shows, and Haney's Combined is a railroad show."

"As president of the Erin Auld Sods of San Francisco, I—"

"—want to hire Phantasy One? We put Haney's Combined into the city usually; all the shows are *quite* similar, and they all close the third week in October for the wet months. Haney's reopens in mid-June, and Phantasy Two opened the middle of last month. Phantasy One stays in winter quarters until the fifteenth of this month. End of next week."

"Haney's is fine for us. Ah, where *are* winter quarters?"

"Santa Rosa," said Madame George.

FRIDAY, March 7, 6:50 a.m. —— Under dawn sunlight the Santa Rosa street looked dusty and disheveled, like a man who had drunk too much the night before. A lone mongrel trotted across the narrow blacktop without a thought for cars. O'B, also looking like a man who had drunk too much the night before—which he had—skittered an empty whiskey bottle across the sidewalk. His hands were deep in his faded dungaree pockets.

"It's cold," he complained, hunching his shoulders.

The dog didn't answer. It merely kept on moving, with a reproachful look as if O'B had thrown a beer can at it. O'B crossed the street toward a lot crowded with strange shapes—metal braces, odd-shaped canvas frames, long round iron poles bright with new paint.

The door of an aluminum house trailer on one side of the lot creaked open and a short, almost dapper man stepped out. His thick curly hair was grizzled at the temples, his

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mustache was neatly trimmed; even in T-shirt and underpants he bore the stamp of authority. A tousled blonde head appeared above his shoulder, and he turned to curse in a surprisingly deep voice. The girl disappeared abruptly with a flash of pale nude flesh like the turn of a fish deep in muddy water.

"Jug Butt!" the man roared. "Get 'em up! Gotta hump it today!"

A fat but powerful young man, barefoot, came out of the corrugated iron shed that backed the lot and stood blinking in the sunlight, scratching a remarkable expanse of gut with a grimy paw. He hawked and spat into the oil-soaked dirt, swore, and returned to the shed. From within came loud voices, curses, a thud, heavy laughter.

O'B walked up to the trailer. "You hiring here, mister?"

The stocky straw boss took in his worn clothes, lean drinker's face, red-rimmed eyes. "Yeah. Ten a day, sleep in the shed if you ain't got nowhere else. You ever been a carnival roughie before?"

"No. But I'm not green."

"God knows you ain't. I'm Carlos Ryan."

"Patrick Michael O'Bannon."

Ryan returned his grin. "Okay, Red, once the boys start in you can help Jug Butt load those Tilt-a-Whirl baskets onto a truck."

From the shed came an abnormally skinny man in his mid-twenties with a motorcycle cap pushed sideways on the back of his head. The teen-ager with him, called Billy the Kid, addressed the skinny man as Curly. Next was a lanky, powerful, rawboned man with mean eyes, whose accent identified him as Tex; a quizzical-faced man with a loud voice and a weak chin, named Garrison; and a toothless old duffer called, for obvious reasons, Hairless Hans. Last was Jug Butt.

No Arnaldo Pedretti. It probably had been a nutty hunch anyway, that a man with sixteen thousand would work for sixty a week, sleep-where-you-can. Still, O'B decided he'd give it a day; Payne/Pedretti, he felt sure, had spent some time with this carnival the previous season.

They worked under a sun so hot that O'B wondered if he'd collapse before he even asked a question. He lugged Tilt-a-Whirl baskets with Jug Butt; since gloves were considered cowardly, his hands soon were leaving red smears on the sharp-edged aluminum buckets. Damn Kearny!

At ten o'clock Carlos Ryan emerged, paint-spattered, from the shed. "Hell," he said, "ain't no use dyin' for a sawbuck a day."

They crossed the street to Carter's Joynt, a long narrow neighborhood bar with worn hardwood floors, boiled eggs in glass bowls, and three pinball machines. Tex bought two bucks worth of dimes; all had beer except Carlos Ryan, who had a shot of bourbon.

Carter, the owner, looked them

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over, took a deep breath, and said to Billy the Kid, "Say, listen, how old are you, anyway?"

"He's a carny," growled Tex. "He don't have to be of age."

"Yeah? Try telling that to the Alcoholic Beverage Control." Looking at Tex, he subsided suddenly, drew another beer. "Aw, hell."

From ten thirty to noon they worked. Lifting, hauling, sweating, swearing, grunting, O'B learned only that Hairless Hans and Ryan had been with Phantasy One the previous season. Ryan wouldn't talk, but Hans might. O'B would try after lunch, he decided, which was sandwiches at Carter's Joynt. Ryan had another shot. O'B understood the he-mannish gesture: with a tough crew like this, the big uninhibited blonde would be honey to the bees unless Ryan were more than mere nominal boss.

At two o'clock Tex, Jug Butt, and Billy the Kid left in one of the ancient trucks to pick up some jenny horses across town. Ryan and Curly were in the paint shed doping fabric wings for the airplane ride, and Garrison was buried in the innards of the antique truck which bore the words *POP CORN, PEANUTS, SUGAR CANDY*. But as O'B sidled toward Hairless Hans, a new car pulled up and a young man with long hair got out. The pretty girl with him, who wore a Mia Farrow cut, stayed in the car.

"Hey, is there a fellow around here named Billy Weston? About my age, maybe seventeen? They call him Billy the Kid sometimes."

"Billy theh Kid?" Hans scratched where his hair should have been. "Don't recall any sech feller 'round here."

Curly brought the water jug. "Why'd you say that, Hans?"

The old man drank noisily, Adam's apple popping, water drooling from his nearly toothless mouth. He winked slyly at O'B.

"Now, Curly, say theh Kid had planted his seed in thet there orchard. An' say thet there was thet girl's brother. See? You ain't traveled wit' theh carny yit. Carny takes care of ets own. Carny don't ask questions. Why you figger ain't no tax taken outen y'r pay?" He cackled toothlessly. "Think my mother wouldda know'd me by Hans?"

So much for trying to pump *you*, O'B thought to himself.

Tex's semi grunted around the corner, struck the curb, and blew a tire with a sound like a mortar being fired, then to stop smashed into a tree. Tex jumped from the doorless cab and strode to the shed.

"Hey, you, Carlos Ryan!" When the dapper boss emerged, Tex bellowed, "I thought you said that there truck was fixed up!"

"I did. Garrison's a mechanic and he did it yesterday. He—"

"Who the hell told him?"

"Told him what?"

"That he was a mechanic. Brakes went out on the way over and the

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clutch on the way back; hadda drive it by ear. He may a' been a mechanic somewhere else, but he ain't but a big mouth around here."

At 6:00 p.m. they lined up outside the trailer for their pay. A week before, O'B had been drinking bourbon with Dan Kearny; now he was hot, flushed, sunburned, and tired. He stank. His hands were cut, and where they weren't cut they were blistered. And he was no closer to Arnaldo Pedretti than he'd been that morning. Or was he?

Some nagging thing made him go over to Carter's Joynt to drink beer, listen to the ping of Tex's pinball machine, and talk with Carlos Ryan.

"You must have seen 'em come and go, Carlos," he opened.

"Yeah, Red, been with it long enough to know better," Ryan grinned. "Y'see, I'm half Irish, half Spanish, and half carny."

"That makes three halves," objected O'Bannon.

"You better believe it," said Ryan.

A large laborer with his yellow safety helmet on the stick beside him, the bar's only other customer, gave a snort. "Did you say *carny?*"

Tex said suddenly, "One hundred free games! An' I'm buyin'!"

"Mark 'em off." Carter disgustedly jabbed *NO SALE* on the register.

"I ain't drinking with no carnies," said the laborer.

"Your privilege," said Ryan quickly; but Tex already had set down his glass of beer and was staring at the construction worker.

"You ain't drinking with us, buddy-buddy? Down in Texas a man don't refuse to drink with another man unless he's meanin' to—"

"Texas?" The laborer leaned back against the bar with his elbows on it. "Feller tole me once that the way to find Texas was to go east far enough to smell it, and south far enough to step in it, and I'd—"

The heel of Tex's hand, swung by a strap-steel right arm, exploded on the other's jaw, upsetting man and stool. The laborer's head rebounded from the hardwood floor with a great ka-thunk as Tex surged forward, giving his battle cry: *"YAHOO! SAN ANTON'!"*

Ryan flicked O'B's half-full beer off the bar in an underhand arc. The spinning bottle caught Tex just above the right temple; he went over sideways against a dark-varnished plywood booth. He lay still for a time, then sat up rubbing his temple with a horny callused palm.

"Aw, hell, Carlos," he said plaintively, "what'd you have to go an' do that for?"

"We don't want law trouble. C'mon; I gotta make a phone call anyway." He dropped a twenty on the bar and jerked a thumb at the fallen warrior. "You never saw us before, right, Carter?"

Carter grinned. "Total strangers to me, Carlos."

Outside, O'B checked his watch:

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7:30. Night had fallen and it was chilly again. He hobbled around the block twice on work-stiffened legs, cursing but glad to be using his head instead of his back once more.

The missing Jaguar bothered him, but there would be an explanation. In the dark he crossed to the aluminum house trailer where, he hoped, Carlos Ryan would supply the answers he needed.

The blonde peered at him with incurious eyes. She was dressed in a sweater and such impossibly tight jeans that she reminded him of Little Annie Fanny in the *Playboy* cartoon satires; nobody could be that dumb but somebody was. Ryan was working at the small fold-down kitchen table; through the doorway was a narrow living room with a television set, and beyond that the bedroom with an unmade bed. O'B jerked his head.

"Could she go change the sheets or something, Carlos?"

"I'll watch TV," pouted the blonde, pausing at the miniature refrigerator to get a can of beer and wiggle a petulant behind.

"That's a good girl." As "Hogan's Heroes" blasted from the set, O'B flopped his identification open on the table in front of Ryan.

"About your embezzlement last May thirtieth from North Beach Litho—"

Ryan leaped erect, crashing his chair back against the stove. His powerful fingers were clawed for throat gripping, but O'B managed to retain his carefully careless pose.

"Sit down, Pedretti. You're not a killer, just a cheap carny straw boss. God, I never knew roughies worked so hard. Sit down, man."

Carlos Ryan, tough little dude, gave the sort of sob that Arnaldo Pedretti, mama's boy, thief, and sometime bookkeeper might have given, and all the starch went out of him. O'B had seen it a thousand times: you hit the subject with the inevitability of your presence and he reacted blindly, with panic. That was the dangerous time. Then his mind began to function, he made a mental adjustment to the new situation, and you could begin to deal with him on a rational basis again.

"I—how did you find—"

"It's our business to find people. Your sister didn't mention us when you called her an hour ago because she didn't know about us. What happened to the Jaguar, by the way?"

Pedretti's color was returning. "Gladys totaled it three months ago." He considered for a moment. "She's too dumb to drive."

"Agreed." O'B laid down the snapshot. "I almost missed you because I was after an overweight, mousy guy with soft hands, horn-rims, and not much hair. But five months as a roughie toughened you up and slimmed you down. Add a mustache and a good hairpiece and contact lenses—and *presto*, Carlos Ryan."

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Pedretti was looking at his picture. "God, that *is* me?"

O'B, busy pouring two bourbons, nodded. "Little things gave you away. I'm enough of a boozer to know you were playing a role with those straight shots. Then the phone call tonight, seven thirty—on the first Friday of the month. You threw that bottle at Tex under-hand—like a softball pitcher. Finally, your woman is six inches taller than you—like Agnes Versaggi. She said you liked 'em big."

"I've found I also prefer 'em like Gladys," he said drily. "With their brains in their backsides. I should have just left, you know? But without taking the money I never would have made the break. I *had* to take it, so I couldn't ever go back."

"How'd you get your job here?"

"Just chance. I've always been sort of a romantic, so when I ran across Phantasy One up by the Oregon border, I got a job as a roughie. An old gal named Madame George was running it then." His grin was a fleeting Carlos Ryan grin. "Used to be in a skin show, when she got fat she worked a mentalist act. She got the whole story out of me and decided to help me. She set it up for me to run the section this season." He swallowed suddenly. "What happens now, Red?"

Funny: while Pedretti had thought of himself as Carlos Ryan, he had *been* Carlos Ryan—tough, jaunty, uncomplicated. Now he was mush. O'B had preferred Ryan to Pedretti.

"How much money is left?" O'B asked briskly.

"Something over ten thousand. The rest went for the Jag, the contact lenses, the wig. Now—"

"Now we have a drink." O'B fitted actions to words. "And a talk."

Forty minutes later he was on the horn with Dan Kearny.

"Ten thousand is in a Santa Rosa safe-deposit box. He'll turn that over to me on Monday, along with a promissory note for the rest, bank terms at two hundred a month."

"Any chance he's planning a skip, or some rough stuff?"

"He's just damned grateful to get out from under. Besides, there's this other guy, a real old carny type—"

"Dammit, O'Bannon," Kearny bellowed in sudden comprehension, "if you think you're going to run up a big expense account on booze—"

"I'm telling you, Dan," said O'B virtuously, "this other guy will make us a *great* carny contact. His name is Carlos Ryan and he says he's half Irish, half Spanish, and half carny—"

"Wait a minute," objected Dan Kearny, "that makes three halves."

"Why, so it does," said O'Bannon. "You better believe it."

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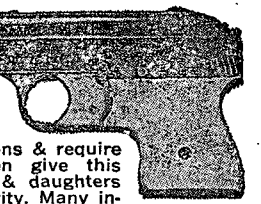

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